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Like deer sleeping beneath white oak

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Like deer sleeping beneath white oak

by

Dennis Elmer Thompson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
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Iowa State University

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2005

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Dennis Elmer Thompson

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

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ORADORO*Donnie Martin*

“Did Oradoro kill Uncle Gunder?”

The voice of my ten year-old brother Buck broke through the pitch blackness, the silence of our upstairs bedroom. Lying in the darkness of midnight, thinking back over the events of the past weeks that had plagued our family, I had forgotten my little brother was across the room. Did Oradoro kill Uncle Gunder? His question caused me to wonder if Buck could know my thoughts as each played through my head.

“Donnie...Donnie, you awake?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m awake,” I whispered. “Don’t ask stupid questions.”

Buck turned on the nightlight, rolled onto his stomach, and propped himself up on his elbows.

“Yeah, but I heard Dad tell someone on the phone that he knew someday that horse would kill the old man,” said Buck.

“Oradoro didn’t kill Uncle Gunder,” I said.

“Yeah, but...” said Buck.

“Listen, someone shot Oradoro. We don’t know who.”

Buck stared at me with a questioning look

“Uncle Gunder had a heart attack after the horse died when he and Richie were burying the horse,” I said. “Get it? The horse didn’t kill him.”

“I guess so,” said Buck.

“Go to sleep!”

“Donnie, why does Richard get to sleep in the horse barn, instead of up here with us?”

“I dunno. Mom said he could, I guess. Oradoro was his horse. Uncle Gunder bought it for him and now Gunder and the horse are both dead. He’s sad about it Buck, real sad. Understand?”

Buck rolled onto his back. We both stared at the long shadow on the ceiling that had been cast by the nightlight. We whispered on without looking at each other, our eyes fixed on the dark unmoving shape.

“I guess so,” he said. “I wish I could sleep in the horse barn with Richard, don’t you?”

“I suppose. Now go to sleep.”

“Donnie, why aren’t they having a church funeral for Uncle Gunder? How come they’re having a burial with just our family?”

“I dunno know. I guess it’s the way Uncle Gunder wanted it.”

“Yeah, but people liked him. Don’t you think the neighbors would want to come?”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’d like to come. Now, hit the sack.”

“Donnie? Why would someone shoot Richard’s horse? It was so pretty.”

His question stopped me. I had asked myself the same question over and over again. The answer wasn’t easy. I turned and looked at him.

“I guess there’s just mean people in the world. Mean and jealous. Get to sleep. We’ve got Uncle Gunder’s burial in the morning, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. Thanks for talking. Goodnight Donnie.”

“Goodnight!”

* *

The morning of Uncle Gunder's funeral we stood congregated in the kitchen, dressed in our Sunday best, and waited to load into the car for the trip to the cemetery. It was to be a small burial service in a private graveyard, no preacher, no church doings as Gunder would have said, just the family. Gunder wasn't irreligious. He read his Bible early each morning, bowed his head to say a Norwegian prayer before meals, never touched a drop of liquor, and when he said goddamn that son-of-a-bitch, he literally meant for the heavens to split and lightning to fly from on high. And yet, Uncle Gunder Saebo refused to set foot in a church after April 27, 1937. That was the day Holan Helgren, the White Oak Church minister, refused to officiate over the funeral of Gunder's brother Reier.

Uncle Reier Saebo had committed suicide. In his heavenly wisdom, Pastor Helgren decided that no unrepentant sinner would ever be laid to rest in the White Oak cemetery. Gunder buried his brother on his own land; in an area near the timber that he kept groomed and fenced. Saebo Hill became our family's graveyard in White Oak, before county laws and ordinances eventually forbade such practices.

A loud rumble rose outside in the farmyard. It was the noise of Red Halverson's feed grinder as he pulled up to do his monthly duty of turning picked ear corn into fodder for our cattle and hogs. It was our day, the third Wednesday of each month. The '53' Chevy flatbed-converted into a hammer mill corn crusher- let out a loud "kerploom." Red backed his junkyard on wheels up to the crib, shut the truck off, and began unloading the equipment.

"You forgot to call him?" said Father, his eyes focused on Mother.

She looked alarmed, standing in her black dress, her black linen gloves skintight, clutching the doorknob to the back porch.

"Sherman, it slipped my mind," she said. "I've had so much going on since Gunder died. Can't Red come back tomorrow? He'll understand."

"No," said Father. "We'll grind the feed first, then take care of burying Gunder. You boys go change into your work clothes. Let's get this done."

Mother started to cry and went to the bedroom.

My brothers Richard, Buck, and I waited to make sure that the issue was settled before we headed upstairs to change into our blue jeans and t-shirts. Father glared in our direction. Buck and I began to turn toward the stairway to our room. Richard faced him unmoving.

"It's disrespectful, working before his funeral like this," said Richard. "I'll go tell Red to come back tomorrow."

"Gunder can wait," said Father. "He's not going anywhere. Get changed."

Richard stood tall. He stared straight back at Father, their eyes level. Richard tried to walk past him, out through the back door. Father grabbed his arm and jerked Richard around to face him.

"You'll get changed now," he said, his lip drawn tightly against his teeth.

Richard pulled away. I watched his shoulders sink, then gently shake as he cried softly.

"It's disrespectful to Gunder. It's just not right."

Father slammed the back porch door as he left to change into his flannel shirt and bib overalls. Richard turned toward the back door as if to say something, then headed out the front door. I watched him from the upstairs window. He cut past the barn, straight for the horse pasture. He walked slowly, looking down, his white dress shirt untucked from his

baggy black slacks. He took the path that he and Gunder would take early in the morning and again in late afternoon before supper, the trip to the horse barn. Richard was Uncle Gunder's *hestgutt*-horse boy.

* *

We grew up on Uncle Gunder's farm in White Oak, Iowa. White Oak was a farm community, not a town nor even a village. It was merely a group of farm families who, over the years, had bought and cleared the fertile ground that surrounded the White Oak timber in northeast Polk County. The families had built a church, the White Oak Christian Church, on the east side of the only gravel road that cut down through the deep ravines and gullies that criss-crossed the two miles of tall oak and ash trees. White Oak was an anomaly in central Iowa, an unusual abyss of steep hills covered with various types of vegetation and wildlife, situated amongst the mostly flat to rolling farm fields surrounding it.

Uncle Gunder rejected the notion that a glacier had formed the area. He claimed that God had repeatedly dropped his axe into that spot of the earth, carving out the rugged land that my brothers and I would explore as young boys. We ran the deer trails, traveling the length and breadth of the woods, climbing to the top of the trees to find our bearings. In the distance, we would see the familiar corn and bean fields waiting quietly to lead us back to our home. We would listen for the distant sound of our hound; Black Belle bawling to be let loose from her chain to chase and tree, the way we were allowed to run free until chore time.

Uncle Gunder had purchased the farm back in 1931. He and his brother Reier had been bachelors their entire lives. Sons of Norwegian immigrants, the two brothers worked as farmhands, gravediggers, and went around into the small towns to dig and lay drainage tiles and water lines for the developing communities. They survived together, living in the barns

of the farmers who employed them. They saved their money, placing it into a small steel milk can, which they buried and moved frequently to avoid detection. Their suspicion of banks paid off in 1929.

During the Great Depression, when banks started closing and farmers began losing their farms, Gunder and Reier possessed what funds they had accumulated over the years and were in a position to purchase the land in the area as it became available.

On January 8, 1931, Gunder and Reier bought 80 acres of river bottomland a mile and a half east of White Oak. Four months later, on April 15th, they acquired Lester Moore's farmstead. The 160-acre quarter section consisted of 76 acres of rugged timber and 84 acres of tillable land. Their land acquisition allowed the two brothers to attain a level of independence they'd never known. Reier took charge of the crop production on the farm, while Gunder began incorporating livestock into their newly founded enterprise. By the end of 1931, Gunder and Reier Saebo owned fifteen head of cattle, nine sows with litter, three milking dairy goats, and six horses. As the two progressed, Gunder began a side business of buying, training, and selling horses for use as draft stock, driving, and pleasure riding.

During the spring of 1937, Reier Saebo, suffering from on-going bouts of depression, diagnosed himself as having brain cancer. He ended his relentless headaches on April 27th by hanging himself in the corncrib. Gunder grieved his brother's death and buried him on a plot of hillside pasture near the timber. He faced life alone on the farm for the next four years.

In August of 1941, Gunder's other brother Milford and his wife Esther were killed in a car accident near Orange City, Iowa. The couple's fifteen-year old daughter Mildred came to live with her only surviving relative on his farm in White Oak.

My mother's life in White Oak, while not easy, enabled her to cope and endure hardship. She and Gunder developed a special relationship. Gunder assumed the responsibility of parenthood and provided for her needs. My mother, in turn, took care of cooking, cleaning, and helping her uncle with the livestock chores. Together, they worked and built Gunder's horse trade. She learned to ride, break, and bargain with the adult men who would come to visit the farm to purchase stock horses. Gunder nicknamed my mother *epelpiken*, a Norwegian word for apple girl, in part because she carried with her a supply of crab apples for the horses, but more so, she had become his pride and happiness, the apple of his eye.

In the spring of 1956, twelve years after my mother met and married my father, one year after my brother Richard was born, my family moved onto Uncle Gunder's farm in White Oak. My father had lost the farm ground he was renting when his cousin offered the landlord a higher rent share for the ground. My father continued to support our family by doing custom hay baling during the summer months and harvest work in the fall.

Upon hearing of our family's hardship, Uncle Gunder decided that it was time to go into semi-retirement, to turn the fieldwork over to younger hands, to a family who needed the help to get by. He sent my mother a letter notifying her of his decision, inviting her back to the safety she had once known as a girl, a place where she could watch her family grow.

* *

Oradoro came to the farm on June 7, 1969, the first Saturday in June. Father had been cutting hay in a small field near the entrance to our lane. Buck and I followed the fence line behind him looking for rabbit and pheasant nests to plunder. We searched for the abandoned babies; hopeful we could raise them in the cage we'd built in the barn.

Buck and I watched as Uncle Gunder's pickup came over the hill pulling his horse trailer, a low cloud of dust blowing off into the cornfield. We ran back toward the farmyard. Father had finished the hay cutting and was already parked under a shade tree near the tool shop.

Uncle Gunder's rattletrap horse trailer shook and rocked as it came to a stop outside the horse barn. He and Richard eased out of the truck into the midday sun. Father stepped over to investigate the racket. My mother walked across the farmyard followed by our cousin David. We stood in amazement watching the trailer, listening to the thrashing kicks against its side walls and end gate.

"Gunder, what the hell you got in there?" asked Father.

Uncle Gunder reached into his overalls and pulled out a plug of Bloodhound. He bit off a piece of chew and began working it in his cheek as though deep in thought. He wiped his hand over the tobacco-stained frown creases around his mouth and spit a long thick brown stream onto the ground near the back tire.

"Well..." said Gunder.

"Oradoro," said Richard, walking behind Gunder. "We bought Oradoro at the horse sale in Ankeny this morning."

Gunder unfastened the trailer's end gate and went to the front of the trailer to undo the lead. He backed the horse out into the bright June sun. It giddily pranced around trying to get its bearings.

Oradoro stood 16 hands tall at the withers. A two year-old thoroughbred colt, dark chestnut, a white blaze across the face, two white socks on his front legs and two white

stockings on his rear legs. The colt appeared slick and well-conditioned; thick and muscled in his hindquarters, long-legged to the fetlocks.

Oradoro's ears pinned back tightly against his head. His eyes bulged as he searched frantically for a familiar face.

"Let me take a look at him," said Father quickly approaching the horse's front end. Oradoro reared onto his hind legs and started raking his front hooves at Father's head.

"Wouldn't do that," said Gunder. He spit brown into the sandy ground, then pulled the lead closer and grabbed the halter to calm the horse.

"Jesus Christ," said Father.

Uncle Gunder tightly clenched the halter, wrestling for control of the large colt, his nostrils flaring at father.

"The hell are you thinking, bringing a rank horse like that around these young boys? That's no horse for a 78 year-old man to be fooling with."

"He's not a rank horse," said Richard. "He's just not been handled right."

Richard walked up to Oradoro and began talking calmly. He stroked the horse's neck, cooing quietly as it began to settle down. Oradoro stood without flinching. He pricked his ears forward and the fear disappeared from his eyes.

"Leg up," said Richard.

Gunder looked at the two of them, his *hestgutten og hest*.

"You sure boy?" asked Gunder, grunting as he bent over. He interlocked his hands to help Richard mount the horse.

"*Ja, ja*," said Richard.

In one smooth motion, Richard stepped up into Gunder's hand, swung his leg over, and sat bareback on the colt. For a moment, they looked like a statue in the sunlight. Richard held the horse's dark mane as Gunder removed the halter and lead rope. Richard pressed his knee firmly against the right side of Oradoro's shoulder to turn the horse toward the barn. Oradoro walked away then broke into a trot. Richard bounced to the rhythm of the horse's gait as they entered the barn.

"How much you give for him?" asked Father.

"Twenty-five dollars more than the kill buyer wanted to pay," said Gunder, with a grin.

"Whose stock is he out of?"

"Luther Montgomery's stud Dancin' Oracle and his mare Callydoro," said Gunder.

Luther Montgomery was a second cousin to my father. He had moved his family to White Oak from Jonesboro, Tennessee in 1962. Luther's family had been well known as horse traders in Tennessee. They moved to Iowa to breed and train racehorses for Ak-Sar-Ben in Omaha and Hawthorne Race Course in Illinois. The slower colts and fillies, the ones who couldn't make fast times, were trained and sold as dressage show horses. Luther and his oldest son Maze treated their stock harshly. They knew how to break a horse quickly, the old-fashioned way, only their method hadn't worked with Oradoro.

"Luther wouldn't sell a sound horse with that kind of breeding," said Father. "Not at a sale barn."

"Ja! Well, he told the auctioneer to tell the crowd that the horse had a broken cannon bone in its front leg. He wanted the colt to go to the kill buyer," said Gunder.

"What kind of fool buys a lame horse?" said Father.

Gunder glared back at him. His steel-blue eyes burned through my father. Gunder stood silent for a moment. His white hair bounced in the breeze. He spat a thick stream of tobacco juice at the ground in front of my father's feet.

"That horse ain't lame," said Gunder. "Your cousin pushed a shoe tack into his tendon above the pastern and wrapped it to make it look unsound. Goddamn son-of-a-bitch didn't want anyone but the kill buyer to get that colt. I checked his leg in the stall behind the sale barn."

Gunder went on to explain to us the real story as to why the Montgomery's wanted to sell the horse. He said that Luther's son Maze had been trying to break the horse to ride. Oradoro had thrown Maze to the ground. When he'd gotten up, he kicked the horse hard in the flank. The story that Gunder heard was that Oradoro reared up and flicked his hoof into Maze's chest, breaking two ribs and his collarbone. Maze wanted to shoot the animal, but Luther demanded that they sell it as a lame horse at the sale barn to get some money for it.

"Too bad that horse didn't kick about a foot higher," said Gunder, smiling at my father.

Father turned toward the small barn and began to walk away. It was time to fill his coffee cup with his morning eye-opener.

"Just what we need, more barn space taken up by a goddamn horse. Well, I've got chores to finish," said Father to my mother as she walked back to the house.

"A little too early to be drinking that coffee, isn't it?" said Gunder softly. "*Full tosk.*"

Gunder looked at me and smiled. He often spoke Norwegian around my mother and my brothers and me; never in front of my father. His English was flawless, with only a slight hint of accent. He liked to *snakker Norsk* to remind us that we were part Norwegian. He

cupped the back of my head as we walked down to see what Richard was doing with Oradoro down in the barn.

“Don’t tell your mother I called your father a drunken fool,” he said. “I’m sure she already knows.”

* *

It was the second Sunday of June, the day after Gunder and Richard had purchased Oradoro and brought him to the farm. The second Sunday of each June was the annual White Oak Potluck Dinner and Community Meeting. Each of the fourteen families in White Oak would set aside the date to attend the large picnic held at Lawrence Ness’s farm on the north road of the timber. Lawrence would roast one of his hogs and the other families would supply all of the side dishes. In the afternoon, we’d play baseball in Laurence’s pasture; then hide and seek in his outbuildings.

After dinner, my father and several of the men would go behind the barn and take turns drinking from a bottle of whiskey. At four o’clock in the afternoon, Laurence would ring an old church bell mounted on two stout fence posts next to his pump house. Everyone would gather under the shade trees in the front yard. Uncle Gunder, the community leader, would conduct the meetings. The first item on the agenda was the election of next year’s community leader.

The community leader was an unofficial, yet important position. Since White Oak was unincorporated and had no official government, the families would elect someone to represent and help them when it came to dealing with the county. If the gravel roads didn’t get graded often enough or the winter snowplows didn’t clear the snow as soon as expected, the community leader would be responsible for contacting the right person.

Uncle Gunder had been the leader for the past thirty-seven years. He had never been opposed since the families of White Oak had started electing him in 1932. Gunder would stand in front of everyone to begin the meeting.

"I'd like to call this meeting to order," he said. "The first point of business is election of the new leader."

Everyone smiled and nodded as though the election had already been settled as it had been each previous year.

"I've decided to step down as community leader this year," said Gunder. "I'm 78 years old this month. White Oak needs to have a younger person take over the job. To open things up, I nominate Bobby Jarniven as the new leader. Are there any other nominations?"

People looked around at each other, murmuring over Gunder's surprise decision to step down. They looked at Bobby Jarniven.

Bobby Jarniven, better known as Chief, lived down the road from our farm. Beulah Jarniven had adopted him after he was found abandoned at the Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Cambridge. Bobby was a full-blooded Indian. People in White Oak had never fully accepted Bobby because of his skin color, with the exception of Gunder. As Bobby grew up, kids began calling him Chief. They made fun of his stuttering problem. The nickname Chief stuck with him.

In December of 1964, after Beulah's death, twenty-two year old Bobby inherited her 172 acre farm, a mix of pasture, timber, and tillable ground. Bobby bought a backhoe and started a field tiling business on the side. He and Gunder would drive around together checking out prospective jobs. Bobby relied on Gunder for his extensive knowledge of the lay of the land and how the tile lines could best be laid. He introduced Bobby to the farmers

in the area and helped him get jobs by telling the farmers that he backed Bobby's work. Bobby treated Richard, Buck and me like younger brothers.

Luther Montgomery bolted to his feet. He turned around and addressed the other families sitting near him.

"I don't know about ya'll, but I don't think much of havin' some timber nigger representin' me as the new leader of White Oak. Chief can't get one sentence out without trippin' over it. Wouldn't set well where I'm from."

"Luther, you better watch your mouth," said Gunder. "Bobby's a member of this community and he's a friend of mine."

Gunder walked toward Luther. He stopped half way.

"Are there any more nominations?" said Gunder.

The families sat silently, looking around to see if anyone else would challenge Gunder's nomination.

"I nominate my boy, Maze," said Luther. "Maze knows how to deal with people. He served two years in the National Guard."

Gunder looked at Luther. He smiled, nodded his approval, then handed out fourteen slips of paper, one for each family. The family members talked back and forth. Bobby and Maze stood off under an elm tree, waiting for the final decision. After the ballots were handed forward, Gunder called the two men over to witness the vote.

"Thirteen votes for Bobby Jarniven, one vote for Maze Montgomery," said Gunder.

Luther and his wife picked up their things and began to walk away toward their car. Gunder followed them.

"I hope there's no hard feelings," said Gunder. "I guess Bobby Jarniven sets well with most the people of White Oak. By the way, I bought that horse you put up for sale yesterday in Ankeny. I checked him over good. That cannon bone in his front leg was sound. Seems he picked up a horseshoe nail in the tendon above his pastern. I think he's going to be fine in a few days. He's a damn nice horse."

Luther grunted and slammed his car door. Gravel shot from his tires as he drove down Laurence Ness's lane. Gunder smiled and walked back over to the picnic where people were gathered.

"Meeting's over," he said. "Anyone up for a round of horseshoes?"

* *

Oradoro had been on our farm for four weeks. The Fourth of July was coming up in two days. The annual Independence Day Parade and Celebration scheduled to be held in Sheldahl nine miles west of us was going to be Oradoro's first public showing. Richard and Uncle Gunder worked with the horse every moment that Father didn't have Richard doing fieldwork.

Each morning Richard would rise before sunup, quietly leave with his clothes and dress downstairs to avoid waking the rest of us. I'd get up and watch him walk down to the horse barn where Gunder's light would be on. During the summer months, Gunder would sleep in a small tack room he had built years earlier. The remainder of the year he lived in an old feed house near the timber that he'd converted into a one-room cabin. It was equipped with everything he needed for comfort, which wasn't much of anything.

On the morning before the Fourth, Gunder fired up the tractor and pulled the disk over the south forty-acre oat field, which had recently been combined and baled for straw. Next, he ran a field cultivator over the ground to level and smooth the soft loam.

Richard walked the saddled Oradoro out of the barn into the fresh morning air, then began jogging the colt across the pasture down to the tilled makeshift track.

“Work him slow,” said Gunder.

I walked up to watch the workout.

“Trot him, then canter halfway around, then give him a full lap at a gallop. Let the horse tell you how he feels.”

“How can a horse tell you how it feels?” I asked.

Gunder spat a stream onto the nearby oat stubble, never taking his eye off the movement of the horse and rider. He had made a half-mile oval track by repeatedly disking the soil, then running the field cultivator over it.

“Horses tell you everything Donnie. One way or another,” he said. “You learn to read how they act, the way they carry themselves, whether they’re happy, angry, scared.”

I nodded and watched Richard and Oradoro make the first turn. I faced the rising sun. Richard stood in the irons, moving to the tempo of the horse, allowing it to stretch and strengthen its stride; his body silhouetted in the orange brightness. He came back around to where we were standing, a wide grin across his face; the horse warmed up and fresh.

“Let him open up now,” yelled Gunder over the sound of hooves in the dirt.

Richard nodded, settled down onto the horse’s back, and conformed to Oradoro’s shape as he ran a second lap. Oradoro lowered his head, opened his stride, and ran at a strong gallop.

Foam formed around his mouth. They covered the distance in less than a minute.

“My god look at that horse run,” said Gunder, his mouth dropping open. “Donnie, we got us a real racehorse and for no more than what I paid for him.”

Richard pulled up on the horse, stood in the irons, and allowed the horse to slow back to a trot before coming up to where Gunder and I were standing. He dismounted and shook his head.

“It felt like he was flying,” said Richard running his hand down Oradoro’s neck and shoulder. “He ran strong.”

“Walk him off now,” said Gunder. “Go for about twenty, twenty-five minutes. So he don’t stiffen up.”

Richard led Oradoro to the water bucket. The horse sucked the water down before bringing his head up with a jerk. I turned toward the house. Father stood in the front yard smoking a cigarette, his arms crossed. He had been watching the workout from a distance. He crushed the cigarette in the gravel then turned to go back into the house.

“Think he’s ready for the Fourth?” asked Richard as he walked the horse past us.

“You betcha,” said Gunder. “After supper tonight, we’ll groom him down and try out the dress saddle. Got to make sure it’s all oiled and shined up.”

The next morning, Gunder and Richard loaded Oradoro into the trailer and headed for the parade grounds at the elementary school in Sheldahl. My parents dropped Buck and me off along Main Street and we waited for the collection of floats, tractors, fire engines, antique cars and the procession of horses to begin the march. At 10:00 AM, a loud boom echoed over the crowd, marking the start of the parade. The American Legion walked in formation. People rose for the color guard to pass. The Central Iowa Saddle Club followed on horseback carrying their banner and a cavalcade of flags. Richard sat atop Oradoro. He rode

alone in the center of the street, waving at the crowd as he passed. The Polk County Horseman's Club trailed behind him. Luther and Maze Montgomery led the group of quarter horse and thoroughbred owners.

Uncle Gunder strolled along the parade route. Walking behind the crowd, he eyed the horses and watched the faces of Luther and Maze as they followed Oradoro to the end of the route. At the end of the parade, people gathered near the large 80-acre pasture off the dead-end road on the east side of town. North of the grassy field, a carnival was set up with food booths and rides. Richard and the other riders trotted around the grass allowing the animals to burn off nervous energy.

"Hey Martin. Richard Martin."

Maze Montgomery called over to Richard as he and his father Luther entered the pasture on horseback. Maze sat on his bay gelding quarter horse, a cigarette hanging off his lip. He stared at Richard through dark Foster Grant wrap-arounds, a smirk on his face.

Richard turned and walked Oradoro over to the father and son.

"You mean to tell me you waste good oats and hay on a horse like that?" said Maze.

Maze sat relaxed in the saddle as the bright sunlight reflected from his dark sunglasses.

"A horse like what?"

Richard tensed and leaned forward in his saddle. Oradoro began to shift and prance around.

"Like that goddamn hay burner you're sitting on," said Maze.

Richard's face turned red. He looked at the people gathering around to listen to their conversation.

"You wanna race?" said Richard. "Right here in front of a crowd."

"How much you wanna bet, farm boy?" said Maze with a grin.

"Well, uh... I don't have any..."

"Forget it son," said Luther. "Farm boy don't have any money. He's riding a damn dog food horse for crying out loud."

The crowd began to laugh at Luther's remark.

"Fifty dollars!"

A voice called out from the back of the crowd.

"Fifty dollars on the chestnut colt."

Our neighbor, Bobby Jarniven, walked to the front of the crowd, a fifty-dollar bill raised up at eye level for everyone in the gathering to see. Uncle Gunder followed Bobby as they approached the Montgomerys.

"Goddamn Chief. You shouldn't get foolish with your money," said Maze. "Course, what do you expect from an Indian?"

Maze began to laugh at his own joke. The crowd snickered nervously.

"Chief, Gunder, we was just joking around with the boy," said Luther. "Having a little fun. We wasn't meaning any harm."

"Fifty dollars says that colt can outrun either one of them horses you're sitting on," said Bobby. "Now put up, or shut the hell up."

Luther and Maze looked at each other. The crowd quieted, listening for Luther's response. Luther reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped a fifty-dollar bill onto the ground near Bobby's feet. Bobby stared off toward the field, his long

black hair pulled into a ponytail. He ignored Luther's contemptuous gesture. He smiled and nodded at Richard on the horse.

Maze checked over the layout of the field then looked at Richard.

"We'll race down to that third electric pole along the fence line. Them poles are set a hundred yards apart."

"Why not race down there then circle the pasture and finish back up here?" said Richard. "That way the crowd can watch the finish."

The people in the crowd began nodding in agreement with Richard. They wanted to watch the horses finish the race in front of them.

"No! That's too far," said Maze.

"Too far against a dog food horse you wouldn't waste good oats or hay on?"

Richard said it with a smile.

"Down and back then," said Maze, flicking his cigarette to the ground as he readjusted the girth strap on his horse.

Richard and Maze walked the horses over to a tree in the fence line that was to act as the starting point and finish line. They crouched down atop the horses, waiting for the signal to ride.

"Mark, set, go!" yelled Luther.

Maze's quarter horse erupted, breaking quickly from the starting line. The thick-muscled bay gelding took an instant three-length lead as Oradoro worked to catch up. Gunder looked at his pocket watch, tracking the secondhand as the horses trailed off in the distance. Maze's horse made the turn at the far end of the pasture. The bay gelding circled and quickly headed back for the crowd in the distance. Oradoro followed in its dust.

"Open up. Let him go," said Gunder quietly.

I could feel Uncle Gunder's grip on my shoulder tighten as the horses approached. Oradoro opened up his stride. I could hear the pounding hooves coming closer as the young chestnut colt passed the older quarter horse. The bay gelding faded six lengths behind Oradoro as he thundered past the cheering crowd, gathered along the fence.

Bobby snatched the fifty off the ground and smiled at Luther.

"Not bad for a dog food horse, Luther," said Gunder. "Let me know when you've got another one to sell."

"Baahh!"

Luther spurred his horse and trotted off toward Maze. The two rode away toward their horse trailer, arguing over Maze's performance in the race.

Richard trotted the horse along the fence line. The crowd started clapping as he dismounted.

"Did he run or what?" said Richard.

Gunder nodded and checked the horse over. He felt down the length of its legs, touching the tendons, joints, and underlying bones.

"*Ja!* He ran well. Don't ever put yourself into a situation like that again," said Gunder. "It's not fair to the horse. It could've broken down on that rough ground."

Richard's smile disappeared. He lowered his head and began to walk the horse to cool him down.

"I got caught up by what they were saying," said Richard. "I won't do it again."

"I guess I did too," said Gunder.

Bobby smiled. He handed Richard the fifty-dollar bill.

“You boys better get him home to some fresh hay.”

* *

Gunder can wait. He’s not going anywhere. Gunder can wait. He’s not going anywhere.

Red’s feed grinder bellowed and roared down below Buck and me. The noise drowned out our attempts to shout at each other. We settled into our jobs of raking and kicking down the piles of corn creating a steady flow for the hammer mill. Buck would stop his work to kill any rats or mice forced from hiding as the corn cascaded around them. He would strike at them with his corn rake, a tool that resembled a pitchfork with the tines bent at a 90 degree angle. Occasionally, he would hit one crawling up the corn crib wall, impaling it on the fork tine, holding it high for me to see, before tossing it to Red’s terrier Sparky waiting outside the crib.

I remembered Oradoro coming to our farm, arriving like a sudden wind gust before an evening summer storm, capturing the hearts and passions of Richard and Uncle Gunder, consuming them with its natural beauty and power. I recognized the attraction that they had toward the horse, its spellbinding majesty, its ability to cover ground with speed and at the same time elegance; its swift machine-like motion.

The grinder’s deafening roar reminded me of the whirling chaos, the slow motion drama that unfolded the morning Oradoro died. It had been one week since Richard’s Fourth of July victory race. Father, Buck, Uncle Gunder and I sat at the breakfast table in the kitchen. Gunder slurped coffee from his cereal bowl, tipping it up as he read the livestock ads. There was a loud thump on the back porch. Mother opened the door. Richard was crying, slumped against the porch wall, his hands and T-shirt covered with blood.

“Oh my Lord,” said Mother as she rushed over to Richard. “What’s hap...”

“He’s dead,” said Richard. “Oradoro’s dead. Someone shot him.”

Uncle Gunder rose quickly, spilling the bowl of coffee as he pushed away from the table. He ran past Richard. He moved quickly for an old man, making short grunt-like sounds as he left the yard.

“Be careful,” yelled Mother.

She watched Gunder hurry away. She turned her attention back to Richard.

We followed Gunder through the pasture to the horse barn. We found him standing on the north side of the barn. Dead on the ground, the horse was lying on its side, four legs stiffly extended, the white blaze across its face soaked in bright red blood.

“My god,” said Father. “Pitiful.”

Gunder paced the area around horse, nearly stepping in the pool of darkened blood around its head. The blood reminded me of spilled motor oil that wouldn’t penetrate the soil surface. Gunder shook. In a rage, he picked up a water bucket that Richard had been carrying to the horse and slammed it into the side of the barn. He grabbed Father by the front of the shirt, shaking him, then violently pushing him away.

“Goddamn those Montgomerys,” said Gunder. “Goddamn your cousins and the day they moved here.”

Father gathered himself. His face flushed red with anger. He stared at Gunder.

“You listen, Gunder Saebo. You don’t know who killed that colt and until you know for a fact you better not go around accusing anybody. You’ll end up with a lawsuit on your hands. You hear me?”

Gunder stalked off toward the house to check on Richard. He and Richard were sitting at the table, their faces blank as I walked into the kitchen.

"We need to get him buried," said Gunder softly. "I'll call Bobby Jarniven and have him bring his flatbed truck and winch over so we can get him buried."

Richard nodded. Gunder dialed the phone. Richard's expression was empty of emotion, his eyes vacant.

Gunder and Richard walked off slowly, talking quietly. They went back down to the pasture and stood outside the barn until Bobby arrived with his truck. Gunder gathered their tools—a shovel and a spade. The three of them drove down through the pasture toward the timber.

"The fool's going to dig it by hand," said Father.

He sipped his coffee and sat down to finish his breakfast.

"Stubborn old man!"

Four hours later, Richard walked into the yard. Father stepped out of his tool shop to look over at him. Mother sat on the front step cutting up green beans into a large bowl.

"Did you get him buried honey?" she asked,

Richard stood staring off into the field behind the house, looking at nothing.

"He's gone," he said softly.

"Who's gone honey?" said Mother, not looking up. "Bobby leave?"

"Uncle Gunder's dead," said Richard, his voice barely a whisper. "He's gone."

Mother jumped to her feet, spilling the bowl of string beans and ran towards the pasture. I followed her, running to catch up. My father drove the Farmall tractor into the pasture lane to see what was going on. Mother stood over the large hole that Richard and

Gunder had dug. She looked down at Oradoro, Gunder's body sprawled next to its head his face purple, his left hand clenching the horse's mane, his right hand grasping at the cool clay wall of the grave.

I put my arms around Mother. She broke down and started to cry. She sobbed until Father walked over and put his hand on her shoulder.

"We better call the sheriff," he said. "They'll have the coroner come out to figure his cause of death. Let's go back up to the house."

As we approached the farmyard, I could see Richard still standing under the shade tree in the front yard. He stared down at the overturned bowl of green beans at his feet.

* *

Buck, Father, and I walked into the back porch after grinding feed. We were covered with sweat and corn dust. It was a dirty job, climbing into that hot corncrib in the July heat, kicking loose the piles of ear corn wedged behind massive crossbeams, waiting to find the one ear that would start the avalanche downward toward the constant river of moving gold. Buck and I were hot and tired. We'd done the hard work without Richard. He normally made the job fun and easy.

"Get washed up and get back into your dress clothes," said father. "We've kept Uncle Gunder and your mother waiting long enough."

Father seemed happy with himself, satisfied that he had gotten his way and that the feed was ready for another month. I heard him in the backroom off the porch, loosening the metal cap from a bottle he most likely had hidden somewhere amongst his chore clothes. He was humming and softly singing, "Shall we gather at the river, where bright angels' feet have

trod. Gather with the saints at the river that flows from the throne of God. Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river..."

Buck and I fought over the bathroom sink, hurrying to wash the dirt and itchy grime from our faces and necks. Mother sat at the table in her black dress and gloves, waiting for the three of us to finish dressing.

"Sherman, I called Don Riis at the funeral home," said Mother. "They'll be heading over to the cemetery for the burial. He was wondering if we had enough men to carry the casket to the grave. Said he'd bring his brother Harold."

"Should have," said Father. "Me, Richard. Chief'll be there, Don and Harold. Donnie can help carry too. He's a strong boy."

I ignored his comment, his attempt to pay me a compliment, his recognition of my obedience and hard work at getting the corn ground into feed. I tucked my white shirt into my black slacks and walked out to the back porch hoping to find Buck and Richard.

We loaded into the car and drove the mile and a half to Saebo Hill. Bobby was standing next to his backhoe smoking a cigarette, the dirt piled neatly off to the side of the cemetery. Richard stood over the freshly dug grave. He stared down into the hole, oblivious to our car or the hearse pulling down the lane behind us. We all got out and huddled behind the back end of the hearse.

"Richard, get down here and help us carry Uncle up there," said Father. "This isn't easy for any of us."

Richard didn't move. He held his ground near the edge of the hole. He was holding what looked to be a white envelope in his hands. We walked slowly up the path to the grave. I could feel the body shift slightly as we ascended the rougher grassy part of the graveyard.

We carried the casket past Reier's grave. I could feel the coolness of the unearthed ground as we set the casket onto the framework over the hole. I looked up at the massive oak tree overhead and thought of the shade trees in the yard that Gunder enjoyed so much in the summertime. Gunder sitting off in the distance, straw hat, bib overalls, the wad of tobacco in his cheek, the brown stain around his mouth, smiling, waving, horses running circles around him, rearing up, flashing their hooves in the bright sunlight.

"Donnie, step back away so we can lower this," said Father.

I grabbed Buck's hand and moved toward Mother. She was standing with her arm around Richard's waist. I had never realized how much they looked alike. The same cheeks, their hair, the way each of them smiled, or in this case, stood stone faced. I understood why Uncle Gunder had taken to Richard. It was more than their mutual love of horses. It was more than the fact that Richard carried the English name equivalent to Gunder's brother Reier. Gunder must have seen the love and kindness of my mother in Richard. Buck and I looked more like our father.

"I'd like to say a few words of prayer," said Mother, her voice strong with emotion.

Bobby Jarniven moved closer to the grave, removed his hat, and bowed his head as she spoke.

"Lord, we thank you for Gunder. We thank you for what he gave to us; a home on his farm, the freedom to work and make a living using his land. We thank you for what he taught us about ourselves and about each other. Lord, we commend him to your care. In Jesus name. Amen."

Richard opened the envelope and removed a coil of horsehair. He unraveled the long lock of tail, tied in a knot at the top. The strands of dark chestnut floated for a moment in the

gentle breeze as he held it suspended over Gunder's grave. We watched. He released the strands of hair; the lock disappeared into the darkness. We stood in silence.

"Don, why don't you and Harold stop over to the house," said Father. "Millie fixed some cold sandwiches and potato salad for lunch. You're more than welcome."

"Thanks, but we have another funeral in Slater at 2:00 this afternoon," said Don.

"It'd push us for time."

We started to make our way toward the car. Richard walked in the opposite direction, following Chief over to the backhoe.

"Richard, you better ride with us and eat lunch," said Father. "Leave Chief to finish here."

"He's gonna stay and help me," said Bobby. "I'll drop him by on my way home."

"Suit yourself," said Father.

He climbed into the driver's seat. We pulled away from Saebo Hill onto the dusty gravel road. I stared back at them. Richard and Bobby disappeared in the distance.

The morning after the funeral, I strolled into the kitchen as Richard walked out the back door to chore the remaining horses. Mother dished me a bowl of oatmeal and stood at the kitchen window. She watched Richard slowly cross the farmyard on his way to the pasture. Father sat at the table across from me, sipping his coffee, reading from an issue of Wallace's Farmer. I poured milk over my oatmeal and eyed my mother. Her mind seemed distant.

"Breaks a mother's heart to see her boy grieving," she said softly. "It ain't right him losing that horse and Gunder in the same week."

"He's a boy," said Father, not looking up from his reading. "He'll be over it soon enough."

"I still worry about him," she said.

"Talked to Ryerson over in Cambridge yesterday," said Father. "He said if we're looking to sell off the rest of them horses, we should do it before it gets too late in the fall, before people clear out their extra stock before winter. I wouldn't mind putting some bred sows in that barn to farrow this winter. Alvin Larson said he'd sell me sixteen of his Durocs."

"I don't think we should be talking about it this soon, not in front of the boys," she said. "It's just criminal somebody shooting that horse."

"What do you think, Donnie?" asked Father. "You'd like some purebred Durocs to show at the fair next summer, wouldn't you? Be nice to be rid of them damn horses, wouldn't it boy?"

I looked at him smiling across the table from me. His smile lured me into saying the right answer, the words he wanted to hear.

"I...I guess so," I said. "I like Duroc pigs. They're nice looking as far as pigs go."

Toast popped up from the toaster, burnt black. Mother hot-potatoed the toast over to the sink and began scraping it before putting butter on it.

"I heard the shot."

The words blurted out of my mouth. I looked at my mother for her reaction. My eyes remained fixed on her face.

"You what honey?"

She set the toast on my plate and listened.

"I heard the shot the night Oradoro was killed," I said. "I was having trouble sleeping."

"So you heard the shot?" said Father, setting aside his magazine. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

I looked down into my bowl, focusing on the small clumps of oatmeal peeking above the milk.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?" I said.

He rose and walked around the table to where I was sitting. He stood over me, looking down as I tried to finish my oatmeal.

"Well, did you get up and look out your window, see if you could see anything?" he asked.

The kitchen became quiet. I could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall behind me.

"Yeah...yeah, I looked down towards the barn," I said.

"Did you see anything?" he asked. "Anybody down there?"

I kept staring at my oatmeal. I felt the glare of his eyes on me. I wanted my mother to start talking about something else; to step in and change the subject, but she was silent. I was afraid to look up. I didn't want my eyes to give away what I really knew.

"Well boy, did you see anybody?" he said softly.

I lifted my face. He and I locked eyes. He stared into mine, burning the question into me. I looked back down at my bowl.

"Well...did you?"

“No sir,” I said. “No sir, I didn’t see nothing.”

FULCRUM

Sherman and Richard Martin

12/25/1969-7:35AM: Sherman

I will tell her. I'll tell her it wasn't my fault, her standing there in the doorway, the blackness of early morning, her hateful eyes staring through me the whole time, her hands trembling, her lips shaking out those words—"take him to the hospital you drunken bastard." She followed me, barefoot through the snow, Richard lying in the back seat of the car shivering, wheezing like a corn sheller before it breaks down on a July afternoon.

"Breathe honey," she said. "Breathe, you'll be fine. Donnie, Buck, and I'll be waiting for you, David too. We'll open presents after Christmas dinner. Richie? You hear me? Richie? Momma loves you."

She started crying. Her charging after me like a biting sow, chasing after me as though I'm carrying her squealing baby. I would have hit her in the face with a scoop shovel. She needed that.

I remembered telling her back before we were married, before I shipped out to the war in 1944. I said, now you remember Millie, the Bible says a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. She laughed at me then as though I didn't mean it. But I mean it now. The Bible I learned from meant it. The Bible I'm reading right here in this hospital waiting room says it—Proverbs 19:13.

My son Richard was no fool. *To have a fool for a son brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a fool.* If God stood here in this waiting room, I'd spit in his face over those words. I'd wrestle him like Jacob did. And I would win. I would bring my son forth like

Lazarus from the tomb. I'd remove his burial clothes and breathe new life into his body. No God will steal my fourteen-year-old son from me, my firstborn, my flesh, true Martin blood.

Those other two sons of mine are weak-blooded like their mother. Donnie and Buck. They'll never amount to anything, not the way she spoils them. She turned them boys against me when they were young. She told them lies about me.

Donnie said, momma says you drink too much daddy, the other one chiming in with him. She says, us boys should never ride with you on a tractor. She says, you drink too much. She says, don't ever follow up behind him on the ladder to the haymow, he might fall down on you. She says, you boys always keep a fence between you and a loose sow in that farrowing house, because Lord knows he could never defend you against one if it attacked. She says... Donnie said.

12/24/1969-3:46PM: Richard

One glass of water, two aspirin, one bronchial dilator sedative, a copy of Famous Civil War Battles, light snow on Christmas Eve. Hold it down. He needs his rest, she says. Go play outside. Better yet, go help your father with chores, she whispers. From upstairs, our farmyard looks like an estate or a plantation. The front yard rolls out like a snow-covered carpet. Get outside, I told you two, she yells. Your brother needs his rest. *Eyes closed. Snow falling. Cold chills. Donnie and Buck, their voices under my window. They scream get up. Get off your back. Don't get pinned. Six team points. Get off your back. Richard don't get pinned.*

I sit up. My head aches from the fever. She takes my temperature every hour like clockwork. A cold washcloth every half-hour, two aspirin every three hours. Drink plenty of water honey, she says when she leaves the room. Rest now, she says. Your fever is finally

down to 101 degrees. I read about the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain. Kennesaw Mountain that's where he got his drubbing, General Sherman that is.

12/25/1969-7:42AM: Sherman

White doors don't swing in hospitals. White doors don't swing because there are none, only cold stainless steel ones, stainless steel like the udder attachments in a dairy barn, waiting to suck your life and breath. And it feels like everything you've toiled and sweated to gain can be taken from you by the turn of a hinge. The doctors walk through them doors. And they know they carry the words that no father or mother will ever want to hear. They stop, just inside the doors to collect their thoughts. And then they come to tell you. Sitting alone in a surgical waiting room on Christmas morning, the intercom voice fades to no voice. It becomes a hush overpowered by the approaching doctors. You begin to ponder the meaning of nothingness and life all at once. You don't want to accept what you're about to hear. They don't wait. They lift their masks. Their words don't match their lips. The sounds bounce and rattle into a grating pitch. In your mind all you see is Richard's face, his lips blue, eyes fixed on you and nothing else.

"Mr. Martin, I'm very sorry. Your son didn't make it. We couldn't get his heart started. The fluid in his lungs had built up to the point that the pressure around his heart was too great. I'm truly sorry for your loss, sir. The chaplain will be here in a few minutes. He'll arrange to have someone take you home to your family."

Shoes walking away from me, down the hallway, through the stainless steel swinging doors. Them black heels stare back at me.

And I wonder why didn't I die? And why wasn't my blood spilled on that beach in 1944, dying men torn to shreds around me, dropping while I remained untouched? There

was no innocent blood on that beach. There never has been in war, not through all of time. And you never forget that, the taking of your innocence. And I could have told Richie. I would have told him. *Son you never forget that smell, burnt gunpowder, perspiration dried for days, grime of dirt and sweat, piss dampness where you stood shaking alone among many. The stench of still bodies, relaxed forever. And it all stays, branded in your memory.*

He would have understood. Richie was like me when I was young, proud of who he was, proud of his name. I should have told Richie.

12/24/1969-7:58PM: Richard

David and Mother move me down into the living room so she can keep a closer eye on how I'm doing. And I remember once Father saying that there's only two things a man has to fear. One is fear and the other is your reaction to it. Those are easy words for someone who has fought in a war. The big one. The war to end all wars. Well, maybe that was grandfather who fought in that war. Father tells me things like that anytime when he wants to give me a life lesson. I listen. I'm the oldest, the most responsible, the one to carry on the family tradition. I thank God he didn't give me the name, the name he carries, as did his father and his father's father.

The name goes all the way back to my great, great, great-grandfather Horace Francis Martin. Horace Martin fought in the big one, fought and killed under Uncle Billy—William Tecumseh Sherman. Our family shines with pride whenever Uncle Billy's name is brought up. Greatest military man in our nation's history, Father says. That's a man to strive to be like, he says. Father fought in WWII. The big war. Was the big war WWI? I think maybe it was. In any case, both he and his father fought in the two big wars. Back to Uncle Billy. That's his nickname for General Sherman, General show-no-mercy Sherman. Slash and burn

all the way to the sea. No mercy for the weak. Granddaddy Horace had been a fire-carrier for the General. He loved the General so much he gave his son the name and insisted his grandson be named after the General as well.

That's where the name comes from, Sherman Tecumseh Martin. My mother saw fit to change the tradition and for that I will forever thank her. I don't normally admit to fear. It's not the Martin way. Stiff upper lip, eyes front and center.

You're a role model for them boys, son, Father says. You just wait 'til you join the army, go to Vietnam. You'll be a leader like every other Martin. I watch the news every night since the Tet Offensive last year. Rice-eating, slant-eyed bastards, he calls them. Only chickenshits attack at night, he says. Bodies in bags. Mothers, wives, and children crying. I'll be a leader? I probably will be a leader, a sergeant or something. I will enlist someday.

The Christmas tree sits dark in the corner of the living room. I see the presents wrapped underneath. The angel on top, her arms lifted, darkened flame torches in her uplifted helping hands.

12/25/1969-7:47AM: Sherman

"Mr. Martin, I'm Pastor Anderson, the hospital chaplain here at Iowa Lutheran. I want you to know that our hearts go out to you over your loss. I've made arrangements to have Clifford drive you home. He'll be here shortly. Would it be all right if I had a word of prayer with you?"

"No!"

"Would you like for me to be there when you break the news to your family, the hospital's quiet today?"

"No!"

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Martin. You and your family will be in our prayers."

I watch the chaplain walk away, back into his room where God's work is easy, where there is a balance between planting and reaping, weeping and laughing, killing and healing. *A time for everything.* God's Word. And now for me, everything is a bunch of meaningless words.

Whiteness of snow, where is my son? Snow like the snow when I rode that train full of soldiers back to Des Moines, its whiteness never as white and pure as before. Where is my son?

12/24/1969-10:57PM: Richard

He doesn't seem so confident now. His bottle in the house is empty. He watches my mother who has been watching me, taking my temperature, and calling the doctor every other hour. I sit up, shake with the chills, and try to breathe. And I can hear him saying that that's where another Martin tradition ends. The strength of the Martin men's bodies during hard times. You have your mother's blood when it comes to sickness, he says. No Martin ever had allergies or asthma, he says. I sound like an old "M" Farmall tractor sputtering in the winter, hitched to a full manure spreader, driving through the slop of spring thaw.

"I'm going to check the sows. I've got two farrowing tonight," he says.

She shakes her head. She doesn't usually argue with him. I can tell she's mad.

"Them damn sows can wait," she says. "Richard needs to get to the doctor tonight."

I want to kiss my mother for sticking up for me, putting me before his wishes, his damn sows. She turns to face him, her hands on her hips, a look of defiance, her rebel yell.

"Now, he needs to go... and I can't stand..."

She starts to cry and shake.

Cry the way the Rebs did in Meridian, Mississippi when old Horace and the General burned it to the ground. They didn't leave a building or field standing. March and burn, march and burn, killing more than flesh. General Leonidas Polk hiding off in Demopolis, afraid to face the fire. They knew what they were doing. Father knows what he's doing too. Defeat. She knows she can't win against a Martin. She sees the fire in his eyes, watches the fire on my cheeks.

"11:00 at night, he'll wait 'til morning," he says.

He shuts the door behind him. Cousin David comes downstairs and finds my mother crying. David came to live with us after his mother died in a car wreck this past summer. He has the Martin last name because his mother, Aunt Teddy, never married the man who "knocked her up" as father says. Low-life traveling salesman, says father. Son-of-bitch should be castrated. *Knocked her up sounds so brutal.*

She gave birth to David four years before I was born. He was a toxemia baby, says mother. Father says he'll never amount to anything with his bloodline. A simple bastard, he says. David does chores, minds his manners and me. He struggles with schoolwork, so I help him with writing and math. David says he wants to go into the army like every other Martin. Father smirks every time he hears him say that. Simple bastard.

David puts his hand on Mother's shoulder the way a small child does when they're unsure of how to comfort. He smiles at me and looks away. I lie there shaking like I'm stuck in wet clothes during a blizzard. He stands quietly, watches, waits. She straightens up and tells him to go back to bed. David plugs in the Christmas tree lights on his way out of the living room.

"It'll make him feel better maybe," David says.

I focus on the red bulbs.

Silver tinsel shines red streams around the room, doubling. My heart pounds faster like a train running highball through town. NO MAIL STOP TODAY, POPS. Red light, green light, tinsel bright. Damn the angel on top of that tree might start a fire and burn our house the way we burnt the Rebs, and the Krauts, and the Japs, and the Gooks, and now we're burning the Vietcong. Jesus Holy Christ. She's gonna burn us. She's gonna burn me, David, Mother, the boys snug in their beds. He isn't in the house. He's out tending sows and drinking whiskey from that bottle hid in the feed house. Son-of-a-bitch. His sins and those of every other Sherman Tecumseh Martin need burning not mine. The rest of us, Mother, David, Donnie, Buck and me, we never decimated nobody. It's him. I remember when we went fishing near Ely, out in the middle of nowhere northern Minnesota. He and I were loading the boat, the boys and mother packing a lunch in the cabin. The motor idling, its oil-burning white smoke across the water. I turned and saw little Buck under the water behind us. I hadn't heard him go in or scream, nothing. I screamed like a girl. Father saved Buckie—saved his son, saved himself, saved his pride. S. T. Martin deserves the Medal of Honor for courage and bravery when he grabbed Buck's little overalls and pulled him up sputtering, crying. "You almost let your brother drown, you screaming sissy," he said. I started crying, knowing how close I was to death—my brother's. I saw true fear in the eyes of a Martin. I hadn't seen Father that scared ever, mad plenty times, but never afraid.

Mother puts a cold cloth on my forehead. I rattle teeth trying to breathe, breathe, and breathe.

"Relax and breathe honey," she says. "Slow down and breathe."

The door opens from the outside into the kitchen. I smell pigshit and whiskey. Why couldn't the sows have killed him? Why couldn't he have tripped and fallen, hitting his head— drunk and bleeding? Sows would have eaten him. Sows like blood. Sows will eat their own afterbirth. I keep my eyes on the angel. Her torches, one in each hand, lifted high to give help. I wonder if she can see him standing in the doorway, drunk on Christmas Eve. Christmas the 25th of December. It's past midnight.

12/25/1969-8:04AM: Sherman

"I'm awful sorry about your boy, Mr. Martin. You just sit quiet, now. I'll drive you home. I've been up by your farm before. Stubb Torgerson's my uncle, lives over by Slater. We go up there for fireworks on the Fourth of July. You know Stubb don't you?"

"What? Oh yeah, yeah, I know Stubb. He's baled hay for me. He's your what?"

"Uncle. Stubb's my uncle. Just sit quiet Mr. Martin, I'll get you home."

The doctor's words felt like what my words to Millie will feel like when she hears them, maybe even before she hears them; when she sees my face. Those words carried forward like mid-July haying, standing in the barn, the large hay door gaping open. You can hear the sound of the rope stretched with the weight of a dozen bales held together with hayforks. The mass of hay rises slowly to the mouth of the door, shutting out the sunlight as it hits the track. It shuttles across the barn peak, until one of the hired help pulls the hay rope and sends the bales crashing to the floor of the haymow.

12/25/1969-12:09AM: Richard

"Sherman, he needs to see the doctor," she says.

She's got the angel backing her, ready to cast down fire from heaven, our tree on this most holy of holy days. Holiness means nothing to the flame when it catches the fabric, the

wood frame of a house, the cotton fields; corn rows, and dried up pastures. It exists to devour. The way a man gobbles up the life of his child or the woman to whom he swore his faithfulness.

“Let him sleep ‘til morning. Then I’ll take him,” he yells.

“He’ll shake his bones loose by morning. His fever’s 104 degrees,” she says.

“Just leave me lie for a few hours woman,” he says. “I’ll take him to see Dr.

Nordstrom in the morning.”

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light, and usher in the morning; ye shepherds, shrink not with affright, but hear the angel's warning. This Child, now born in infancy, Our confidence and joy shall be, the power of Satan breaking, our peace eternal making.

12/25/1969-8:16AM: Sherman

The car ride is quiet now. I stare at the dashboard in front of me. I saved my other boy once. But, not Richard. Little Buck floated underneath the water next to the dock. Richie and I, busy loading the fishing boat, we didn’t hear Buck fall into the water. I thought he was up in the cabin with his mother. Richie screamed and I turned around just in time to pull Buck out into the air. Him gasping and sputtering for breath. Cold and wet. I carried him to the cabin and Richie stood down on the dock crying. Why couldn’t I have saved Richard this time? Why didn’t I take him sooner? Why didn’t I listen to his mother? I could have saved Richie. I could have kept my boy alive.

12/25/1969-4:35AM: Richard

I hear her dialing the telephone, the rhythmic clicking as it rotates in the final moments before connection.

"Doctor, I'm taking Richard to the hospital. He's having trouble breathing," she says.

"Yes, I'll... I'll leave right now."

"I said I'd take him. That's a man's business," he says. "You stay with the children."

Let her go. Come down from on high. Off the tree. The Most High Angel of Fire.

We'll need fire for the journey father. Fire is the Martin way. Burn and destroy.

"Get him dressed. Is he awake?" he says. "Quit crying goddamnit!"

"Help me lift him... his clothes, I can't. We should have gone... we waited too long," she says.

"The car's running," he says. "Up you go mister. Get on his other side."

J-j-j-esus, help m-m-me. I need th-th-the f-f-fire of y-your light.

"Be quiet son, we'll be there soon," he says. "Can you feel the heat? Heater's running full-blast. Doc'll fix you up, down there."

We forgot the flame torches. Father, should I tell you that we forgot the torches?

How can we wage war without fire? I let you down. I didn't see him step on the water.

Flame torches nowhere when we left. Here they are. Speeding by. I can't reach them. Slow down father. Let me fight. I'm a Martin, too.

12/25/1969-8:27AM: Sherman

This ride is almost over. Where are my words? What will I say?

12/25/1969-5:07AM: Richard

"Ma'am, he's outta his head with fever. I got him here as soon as I could," says

Father. "Is the doctor here? Doc Nordstrom he...I mean, where?"

“Sir, calm down we need to treat him with oxygen. Get an oxygen tent set, stat.” she yells.

Angels. She's here with me. Yes, I'm on fire. Don't leave me angel in white, your soft face. Hold me before battle. I'm too young for this war, but in three years...

“Heart-190. Blood pressure—220/115. We're gonna have to keep the oxygen flowing to him,” she says. “We've got to stabilize him.”

Her light shines. Lead me on, Angel of the First Morning. I'm ready to carry the flame, carry the fire alone.

“Mr. Martin, you've got a sick boy here and Doc's on his way,” she says. “I'm going to run down the hall for minute to check on another patient. You stay with him.”

Angel floats from the room, smiling at me and Father. Fire burns through my hands. But, there is no pain. I'm not afraid.

12/25/1969-8:31AM: Sherman

I remember Richie and me alone in that hospital room. The large plastic tent over the top of the bed. The oxygen machine pumping pure air. It won't work right with that open seam, I said. He lifted his hands up to help me tape the seam shut. I felt the heat of them through the plastic as I laid the tape as careful as I could down the center. His helping hands from inside lifted up to steady, while mine trembled like leaves. They dropped. He clutched his chest. His head rolled to the side. He vomited. And I screamed. Nurse! Nurse! I need help in here. I just kept screaming while he lay there.

“This your lane, Mr. Martin? I remember it's a long lane, them big ash trees out front. I bet they give good shade in the summertime. Mr. Martin, I want you to know how

sorry I am about Richie. I'll tell my folks about it. They'll let Stubb know. Well, have a...uh...Good-bye Mr. Martin."

I stumble and fall in the yard. I feel the snow's coldness on my cheeks and taste the warm blood from my lip. I smell the wet fall leaves from under the snow as I pull myself to my feet. Standing there, facing the house in the snow brightness, I walk to the door where Richard and I had left that morning. That door where she had come charging after me like a biting sow defending her young. That same door pulls heavier now, from the coldness on its hinges. The house is still, quiet like everyone's sleeping. The Christmas tree stands dark in the corner. I can see it through the kitchen window. I step onto the back porch. I stand there staring at the shut door in front of me, knowing I will have to turn the knob and tell his mother her firstborn is gone.

I open the door. Millie and the boys sit at the kitchen table. I look at them without seeing their faces. She clutches my shirt. She pulls it tight in her fist. I watch her rise to the ceiling.

"Where is my son?" she asks. "Where is he?"

No scoop shovel in my hand.

"Richie's gone. Richie's gone to heaven."

FULL CRY

Danny "Buck" Martin

Black Oak and Black Belle treed their first coon of the season on opening day November 1976, up the large cottonwood tree in the southwest corner of the White Oak timber. We had set them loose along the fencerow of the picked cornfield north of the barn at dusk. I watched them race, noses to the ground, weaving in and out of the tall grass that separated our farm from Chief Jarniven's land. They disappeared over a hill and then struck.

Oak cried out first as usual. He was a lean hound, fast and furiously engaged on any hunt. His long and lean black body coursed yards ahead of his sister Belle. He was the darker of the two with less tan markings around his chest and muzzle. Pastor Bobby Prather, the man who had sold me the dogs five years earlier, had said that his darker-marked dogs were the best hunters and carried the strongest genetic link to his four-time Night Champion—Prather's Black Preacher Mouth. A dog he affectionately called Mouth.

When Oak bawled out his deep methodical cry, Belle followed suit. Their slow alternating cries echoed against the fast approaching tree line. The timber looked oppressively dark as though we had no business messing with its nighttime life.

"That was quick," said David, calling out to our hunting party. The group included my father, our neighbor and family friend Lawrence Ness, and my father's cousin Granville Montgomery, also called Gran, or Grannie.

My cousin Gaylord David Martin was living on the farm with us now. He'd lost what mind he'd had over in Vietnam back in '71 and went from being simpleminded to confused, paranoid, and spooky simpleminded. He normally followed my mother like a blind child. But tonight, she had encouraged him to go out hunting with the men.

As the three older men walked slowly ahead, David would stop to light his pipe, turn a few circles and mumble to himself, before continuing on with the group. He reminded me of General Douglas MacArthur; his pipe clenched in his teeth, a resolute expression on his face as though he were going to lead an invisible combat unit into battle.

“Goddamn it Gaylord, catch up,” said Father. “I don’t want to chase after you in this timber in the dark.”

“Yes sir, Mister,” David called back and then cut perpendicularly across a field of standing soybeans.

“For Christ sake Gaylord, get out of Chief’s bean field.”

David turned around and headed for the fencerow. I walked briskly ahead of them. I wanted to keep my eye on the dogs. Father and Grannie passed a bottle of whiskey between each other. Lawrence never drank or swore for that matter. He was an unusually kind and polite man, especially to be in the company of my father and Grannie. But, he loved coonhunting and his Walker hound, Sam, had died three years earlier in the fall after sticking his head into a 220 Connibear trap that had been set in a roadside fence. Lawrence always wanted to be a part of any hunt and talked frequently about his dog Sam. I was always glad to have him along in the group. Lawrence was stable and sane.

I took a quick pull from the pint of vodka in my back pocket, then lit a cigarette, and kept trudging toward the sound of the hounds.

“Goddamn them dogs are bawl-mouthed,” said Grannie. “I knowed they’d be good hunters when I first saw ‘em. Back when I took Buck over to Neola to buy ‘em. What was that Baptist preacher’s name he bought them from, Penny?”

Grannie always called my father Penny. It was an old nickname that Father picked up from his older brothers. He ain't worth more than a damn penny, his brothers would say. The name stuck.

"Hell, I don't know. Ask Buck when we get on tree," said Father. "Pass over that whiskey. I bought the damn bottle."

The three men floated together like shadows toward the timber. David was close behind them. I could see the cherry glow from his pipe, the spiraling wafts of smoke that rose ghostly against the clear sky of the western horizon behind him.

"Come on David," I called out. "We've got one treed."

"Yeah, yeah...yup, I'm...I'm coming Danny," said David. "Got one treed. Mister, Buckie Dan's dogs got a coon treed."

"I can hear, Gaylord. I ain't deaf," said Father.

Oak and Belle's voices shifted from a slow running bawl to a rapid continual chop. I could see their upright bodies, leaning like praying mantises on the shadowed tree. I flicked the switch on my headlamp and then shined the bright light from my hand-held lantern up the trunk of the tree. The dogs never glanced my way. They maintained their angered positions. Like sentinels, they would not leave their posts; not in the middle of battle. The dogs seemed to demand satisfaction over the fact that the coon that they'd chased had gotten away, at least for the meantime. The four men finally caught up and shined their lights up into the glowing eyes of the cornered coon.

"Hell, it's just a little kitten coon," said Father.

“Feed it to the dogs, Buck,” said Grannie, in a loud drunken bellow. “You know the rules. The man with his dogs first on tree has to climb up and feed it to the dogs. Ain’t that right Penny? Ain’t that a Martin tradition?”

Grannie and Father started laughing. The whiskey was working hard.

“Danny, you can use my rifle to shoot it down if you want,” said Lawrence.

“Bullshit now,” said Grannie. “Them dogs worked hard to tree that little bastard. A man can’t disappoint his hounds, Buck.”

“Go ahead, son,” said father. “Climb on up and throw it down to the dogs. It’ll make ‘em happy and take a little piss and vinegar out of ‘em. Us old men ain’t gonna be able to keep up with ‘em at this pace.”

“I’ll climb the tree,” said David. “I’m not afraid of heights.”

David tapped his upturned pipe against the wooden fencepost, knocking the glowing cherry to the ground, then stamped it out in the dirt.

“Sounds like Gaylord’s callin’ you chickenshit, Buck,” said Grannie, slurring his words. “Better show ‘im what you’re made of. Here boy, you want a drink of this to steady your nerves?”

Grannie laughed and mockingly extended the bottle of whiskey toward me. I looked at Lawrence. He shook his head and seemed to be embarrassed for me, then looked down at the ground. I could feel the rage welling up. My cheeks flushed in anger.

“Stick that bottle up your fat ass, you fucking bastard.”

I felt the words blurt from my mouth. Father reached out, grabbed my arm, and shook me hard.

“Boy, you might think because you’re eighteen, you’re a man now. But, you don’t cuss your elders. You were brought up better than that.”

Grannie stood solemnly, his face no longer smiling. He seemed to enjoy the attention from my insult. From the corner of my eye, I saw Lawrence raising his rifle to end this nonsense.

“Don’t shoot it Lawrence. I’ll climb the tree.”

I stepped up onto the woven wire fence and balanced myself against the tree trunk. My head pounded from the vodka, the loud chopping bark of the dogs, and the idiocy of what had just transpired. I reached up and grabbed the large thick low-slung branch and pulled myself up into the tree. I negotiated my way upward from branch to branch, placing my foot in a crotch and then pushing further toward the coon.

“You’re about six, eight feet below the coon,” said Lawrence in his booming voice, seemingly determined to help me finish this job.

I switched off my headlamp. Father and Grannie stood below drinking and talking quietly, suddenly oblivious to what I was doing in the tree. The bark of the tree chewed into my arms as I pulled my weight up slowly, sweating even in the coolness of fall.

“Fat motherfucker,” I said, inching closer to the high branches.

“What did you say?” asked David.

“Keep your light up on the coon, David. Not me,” I said in a hushed voice.

I could hear the coon’s claws scratching tree bark as it tried to climb a little higher. It stopped. No where to go.

“You’re about two feet below it,” said Lawrence quietly.

I raised my arm slowly. The small coon growled what seemed an awfully deep guttural noise for such a young animal. Its hair stood on end. Its eyes bulged and reflected a greenish sheen from the lantern light. I looked down. Twenty-five to thirty feet below, Lawrence, Grannie, David, and my father stood at the base of the tree, staring up in silence, waiting for me to grab the coon's hind leg and pitch it to the hounds who were maintaining their raucous chorus. Slobber flew from the dogs' mouths with each savage bawl.

* *

At the age of ten, I had decided that I wanted to buy coonhounds. My brother Donnie had just bought a pair of older Redbone hounds after his thirteenth birthday at a swap meet in Colfax, Iowa. He paid a bargain price of \$35.00 a piece for the tried and tested hounds, or at least that was what the previous owner had claimed they were. When he brought them back to the farm, Father informed him that he would be buying all the food for the dogs from his own money.

We had two farm dogs already, Spike a hyperactive rat terrier who was always dragging small dead animals into the yard, and Champ, an Australian Blue Heeler with one blue eye and one gray eye. Champ was a sinister, untrustworthy dog that father used to work hogs and cattle on the farm. He was as inclined to nip the heel of a human as he was any of the livestock in the barnyard.

The Redbone hounds, Colt and Ruger, were highly affectionate and friendly dogs, though not overly ambitious. Within a week, Donnie found out why he had gotten them at such a cheap price. The dogs liked to hunt, chase, and occasionally tree. Anything and everything. Squirrels, possums, chickens, woodchucks, rabbits, deer, skunks, and once in a great while a coon. By the end of their first week on the farm, they went from being

Donnie's great hope as money-making pelt-providers to a curse. Their final and fatal mistake came when they stayed out late chasing deer during a coon hunt and ended up in Luther "Tennessee" Montgomery's horse barn, riling his bred mares at 4:00 AM. Luther brought the hounds over in the morning; a shotgun blast in each dog's head. He dumped them near the barn and threatened that if any of his mares miscarried, "ya'll are gonna have a real problem."

I was determined to do better. I saved my earned money from walking beans, corn-shelling, and baling, as well as my birthday card cash. I kept the money hidden in a coffee can in the attic—my personal bank. I hid it behind the trunk that held all of my brother Richard's personal effects that were placed there after his death on Christmas Day in '69'. During the process of saving money, I waged a daily campaign to convince my parents that I would find and buy a pair of top quality hunting dogs. I would pull a dog-eared copy of Full Cry magazine out and show them my potential breeders. Mother would respond with a smile and a pat on the head and my father would answer that I was just as determined to be trouble-bound as my brother. Eventually, even he gave into the idea.

In February 1971, my mother and I sat down and wrote a letter to a Pastor Robert "Bobby" Prather from Neola, Iowa. He had placed a half-page ad in Full Cry, listing his hounds' achievements in competitive hunting and advertising the sale of puppies and started dogs. He sold registered Black and Tan coonhounds and I was very interested in buying. We mailed the letter and within a week received a reply and a quote—\$100.00 for a year old male and \$85.00 for a year old female. I had only accumulated \$165.00. Mother secretly loaned me a twenty. I wrote back to the pastor and enclosed earnest money to hold the dogs until April, closer to my twelfth birthday.

In April, a week before my birthday, my father arranged to have his cousin Gran take me to Neola to pick up the hounds. Gran and I would haul a load of bagged seed corn to a farmer in Avoca and then proceed to Neola for the dogs. My mother was at first against the idea and wanted Father to make the trip but he insisted that he had too much field work of his own. She had made plans to be gone that week to care for a sick cousin in Orange City. She promised to return for my birthday and was anxious to see my new purchase. The plan was set.

* *

“Buck, you awake? Buck, we’re almost there,” said Grannie. “Reckon you better wake up and get your wits about you.”

“Hmm...what? Uh-huh.”

I snapped to as Grannie’s pickup bounced off the highway and onto a gravel road. The late morning sun felt hot on my face as his ‘63’ Chevy one-ton truck ground from low gear back up to speed.

“You fell asleep after we dropped off that seed corn, buster. Whatcha doing? Chasing coons in your dreams?”

The bright sun lit the spring hills of western Iowa. This was definitely not the flatter land that I was used to seeing around home. We headed down a long winding road south of Neola.

“Where are we Grannie?” I asked.

“Headin’ to the preacher’s house,” said Gran. “He must be a country preacher living out in the sticks like this. Now when we get there, you let me do the talkin’. This old

Tennessee devil dog knows how to negotiate a deal. I guarantee ya, Buck, I can save ya some money on them hounds.”

“No, Grannie. I already agreed with the man on a price. He’s a Baptist minister. He’s not trying to screw me. Plus, I don’t want him to think I’m trying to chisel him on a set deal.”

“Oh hogshit, Buck! A preacher of any stripe will screw over a fella on a deal. They’ll do it righteous, thinkin’ they got God on their side.”

I sat in silence. The truck rumbled over the washboard road. I stared out the window, afraid that Grannie would offend Mr. Prather and mess up my purchase. We rolled down the road, a dust cloud rising behind us. It had been a dry spring and farmers dotted the countryside fields, tilling the ground for planting.

“Happy Birthday Bucky Martin,” said Gran. “We’re about there. Bet ya can’t wait to see them hounds, can ya? You oughta be glad I talked your dad into lettin’ ya buy them dogs. I says to him, Penny, every twelve-year-old boy needs a pair of hunting dogs. I says, you had ‘em, I had ‘em, and so on and so forth. Coon huntin’s a family tradition, I says to him. And he says, Granville, I guess you’ve got a point. Boy, you can thank me for convincin’ and closin’ the deal with your old man.”

I glanced across the truck. Granny continued his ramble, a cigarette hanging from his lip, an emptied pint bottle of whiskey on the floorboard at his feet, and a sweating quart bottle of PBR between his legs, which he’d tip up and gulp from as he punctuated his thoughts. He was family all right. Gran Montgomery was my father’s cousin from his mother’s side. He was the latest eastern Tennessee transplant to move to Iowa. He showed up in our area back in 1968. Ioway is top of the line for me, he’d say when he had a snout

full. Gran was thirty-eight years old, eight years younger than my father. He had moved from Unicoi County in eastern Tennessee near the North Carolina border after a few bad business transactions. At least, that was how my father put it. Mother had decided that Grannie had screwed over the wrong people and run for his life. Her comment would piss off Father and he'd reply, "Now Millie, he's family." She'd fire back, "He's not my family. I've got no hillbilly blood in this body." It would escalate into a full-scale argument over the derogatory nature of the term hillbilly. "He's country people just like we are and just like you and Gunder's family are—country folk!" She'd usually get the final word, "Yes sir, he's country all right, reeeecal country!"

Grannie bought an acreage east of Elkhart near Cory Grove. He raised an odd assortment of animals: jumping mules, fighting chickens, a few beef cattle, and a small herd of Nubian dairy goats. His main source of income came from tearing apart old cars and machinery and selling the parts to local farmers. Grannie's arms told his life story: a large faded green cross tattoo on his left forearm and a variety of cut and burn marks from working on old, oftentimes hot pieces of metal equipment. A pumpkin-jowled head on a massive trunk of a body, hairy arms, unbuttoned bib overalls revealing no underwear, a sweat and grease-stained t-shirt with no sleeves, and always drunk to some degree. Hallelujah! Granville Ulysses Montgomery.

"My mother was a Christian woman, Pentecostal kind. So Buck, I know the Lord too. I can deal with this here preacher."

We pulled off the road into a neatly kept acreage. A small white house, fenced yard, pump house next to a barn, and a long white farrowing house that had been converted into a dog kennel. Pastor Bobby Prather had a yard full of hounds. Some were penned. Some

were chained. And all of them were well-fed, watered, and had shiny black coats. This man knew how to keep dogs. He walked out his back porch into the yard as Gran shut off the truck. He was neatly dressed in a white shirt, a tie, and black slacks.

"He's wearin' his preachin' clothes," said Gran, giggling like a child as he lit a cigarette.

He approached my side of the truck. I rolled down the window. He leaned in and smiled.

"You must be Daniel?"

"Yes sir, Daniel Martin. Pleased to meet you."

"Is this your father?" he asked.

His facial expression changed. He eyed Grannie smoking a cigarette.

"Granville Montgomery, pleased to meet you sir. I'm the boy's daddy's cousin. Had business over in Neola, so I offered to bring the boy to pick up the hounds. Where are they by the way?"

Pastor Prather pointed to a pair resting under a large shade tree. We opened the truck doors and walked over to inspect my new dogs. They were more beautiful than I had imagined. The male was a long-bodied, rangy hound with a thick healthy black coat that shined in the late morning sun. The female was a little smaller, well-muscled in the hips and shoulders. She had more distinct tan markings on the chest and face than the male.

"Sir, you and me need to have a little talk," said Gran.

"That's fine Mr. Montgomery. You and I will have a talk. But at the moment, Daniel and I are going in the house to fill out the bill of sale, the registration papers, and settle up.

And you will wait outside. Your eyes are bloodshot. You seem to need some fresh air. And outside you can smoke all you want. Afterwards, you and I will talk.”

And that was that. The preacher put Grannie right in his place. He may have been a man of God, but he knew bullshit walking in bib overalls when he saw it. He led me into his office. His desk was neatly arranged; a large black Bible set dead center. The walls were adorned with a variety of plaques and trophies from competitive coonhunting. A large picture of Jesus hung in the center of the brown paneled wall next to his bookshelf.

“So you’re Daniel? That’s a good strong name son. Your parents did well naming you that. You look to be a serious-minded hunter and your letters show that as well. I’m going to help you fill out this registration paperwork and I’ll take care of the fees and mailing it in for you. It’s important to me that my dogs get into good hands and that their bloodlines are kept up. You understand?”

“Yes sir,” I said. “I appreciate you doing it.”

I looked out the study window. Gran had fallen asleep under the shade tree near the hounds. The pastor and I spent the next hour talking about his bloodline, hunting, and the dos and don’ts for handling newly started dogs. We were filling out the papers and he asked me how I wanted their official names to read.

“Martin’s Black Oak for the male and Martin’s Black Belle for the female,” I replied.

“Black Oak and Black Belle. Sounds good to me,” he said. “And your letter said that you live in an area called White Oak, right?”

“Yes sir,” I said. “Black Oak will be living in White Oak.”

He laughed. I paid him the money and we shook hands on the deal. We walked out the back porch. The dogs bounded over to greet us, slapping Gran upside of the head with

their tie-out chains in the process. He grunted and jumped, startled by the commotion. I tried to keep from laughing. Grannie rose to his feet, rubbed his eyes, and lit a cigarette.

“Mr. Montgomery, what was it you wanted to discuss with me?” asked Pastor Prather.

“Never mind. I got nothing to talk about to you,” said Gran. “Fetch your dogs, Buck. Tie ‘em into the back end of the truck. We need to head out.”

“Well now, Mr. Montgomery, you drive safely. Sheriff Jim Duncan over in Neola is a friend of mine, goes to my church. You stop and ask him for directions, if you need help. You understand me?”

The pastor’s voice was calm, level, and yet stern.

“Let’s get outta here, Buck. Your business is done.”

Gran pulled the truck onto the gravel and drove without talking for a half hour. He lit a cigarette and reached under the seat and pulled a new quart of George Dickel whiskey out with a grin.

“That fuckin’ preacher pissed me off, Buck. Son-of-a-bitches’ll screw you over every time. Hell, they expect ya to thank ‘em in the process. Not a one of them does an honest day’s work. Livin’ off workin’ people, that’s all they know. I hope you’re not too mad at me for not cuttin’ ya a better deal with the man.”

“No Gran, that’s all right. He was a sharp one,” I said, smiling. “I’m just happy to have my birthday present.”

Gran drove around Neola the long way, until we came upon a roadside diner. We stopped for a mid-afternoon lunch. I watered the dogs and let them down to run for a few minutes. After eating, we drove off and Gran started back in to drinking his whiskey.

“Buck, you and me are goin’ to celebrate. We’ll take them hounds over to the Nishnabotna River, build us a fire, have a drink, and hunt some coons. Sound good?”

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds real good.”

My mother was gone. Gran knew it and realized that there was no hurry to get me and the dogs back home to the farm. We drove the back roads, winding our way northeast out of western Pottawattamie County into Shelby County. We passed through the towns of Shelby and Corley. The Nishnabotna River splits into four separate rivers flowing through Audubon and Shelby Counties. We had passed over two of the four and headed toward the East Nishnabotna where the timber lining the river was heavier and formed the Prairie Rose State Park. Gran turned off the road and entered a pasture that bordered the south edge of the park and connected to the river.

“You know the people who own this pasture?” I asked.

“Hell Buck, we all own it. Us taxpayers do.”

I stared at him across the cab. He stopped the truck under the shade of some tall tress bordering the pasture. Gran was half-drunk and hollow-eyed. He turned off the engine and sat stupefied until the hounds began bouncing in the bed of the truck, ready to be turned loose to run.

“Reckon we don’t need to burn no fire this time of day,” he said. “Shouldn’t take too long for them dogs to chase up a coon in this thicket.”

“I don’t suppose,” I said. “Should I turn them loose, Gran?”

“Not just yet, Buck. I’m a thinkin’ you need to reach under that seat and pull out that coffee mug, wipe it out good, and we’ll toast your birthday and them dogs proper.”

We both bent forward, feeling under the bench seat of the truck. I surfaced with a grimy coffee cup and Gran held up the quart bottle of George Dickel.

“You ever drunk whiskey, Buck?”

“No...uh, no...I, uh. I don’t think I better drink any of that Gran. I’d get in big trouble if anyone smells it on me.”

“Oh bullshit! You’re a man now in my book. Your momma’s gone for the week. Your daddy’s out in the field aworkin’. Most likely wouldn’t give a shit anyhow. Come on, Buck. It’ll be our little secret.”

He winked at me, grabbed the cup and began pouring the brownish liquid until the cup was half full.

“Here’s to two coonhounds and Buck Martin’s birthday,” he said, throwing the whiskey back and refilling the cup for me. “Your turn, Bucky! Don’t sip it. Just shoot her down your pipe. One gulp.”

I stared at the whiskey, closed my eyes, and poured it down my throat. I felt an instant fire in my chest and head. Coughing and gasping for breath, I looked over at Gran. He grinned and lit a smoke.

“Ain’t so bad is it?”

Smoke poured out of his nostrils in two thin columns.

“One more pull, before we set them dogs to work.”

He tipped the bottle up and drank, then poured another half cup for me.

“I don’t think I better,” I said, my tongue feeling thick and suddenly slow.

“Down she goes, buddy. You a man or not?”

I grabbed the cup, took a deep breath, and drained the whiskey in one motion.

“Whew, shit,” I said. “Shit, shit, shit!”

I giggled. The hounds whimpered and bounced in the back, anxious to begin the hunt.

“Well we kept ‘em waitin’ long enough,” said Gran, opening his truck door and stepping out.

I reached for the door handle, pulled it upward, and tumbled out into the weeds surrounding the pickup.

“I can’t feel my legs,” I said.

Oak and Belle jumped out of the truck bed after Gran released their leads. They licked my face. I got on my hands and knees and tried to lift myself to my feet. Gran grabbed my arm and raised me up.

“Get goin’ dogs,” he said. “Come on, Buck.”

The hounds disappeared through the weeds and began weaving back and forth. Their black bodies became a fluid motion that ran from the eyes to the tail of each dog. They were gone. Gran stood with the bottle jammed in his back overall pocket. He stared at me. I lurched forward after the hounds.

“Hold up, Buck. I don’t want you fallin’ into that damn river.”

I stopped and turned toward him. He held out the uncapped bottle. I tipped it up and felt the fire burn down my throat.

“C’mon, damnit,” I said.

Gran laughed. I stepped forward and fell face-first into the trunk of a nearby tree. I lay on the ground and held my pounding head. Gran lifted me up with his meaty hand.

“Buck, let’s set you down for awhile ‘til you get your wits. Goddamn boy, you’re drunker ‘en pisshouse rat.”

I moaned, clutched my throbbing head, and rested on a large downed hickory tree. Gran stood quietly behind me. He began rubbing my shoulders and the back of my neck.

“You gonna be all right Bucky,” he said softly. “Everything’s just fine.”

“Where’s Oak and Belle? Can you hear ‘em Gran?”

“They’re fine. Just off runnin’.”

Gran stepped over the log, stood in front of me, and bent down and kissed me on the mouth. I pushed him back away.

“What are you doing?”

He grabbed the back of my neck with his right hand; my left arm with his left hand and pulled me toward him.

“Whatever I wanna do,” he said, breathing heavily into my ear. “I done for you gettin’ them dogs. Now you gonna do for me.”

He kissed me again, forcing his thick tongue into my mouth. I tasted the bitterness of cigarettes and whiskey. I began to cry.

“What are you doing this for?” I asked.

“You gonna do for me.”

With his right hand he unbuttoned the fly of his bib overalls and pulled his hardening penis free. He twisted my arm and jerked me into place on my knees. Grabbing my hair and the back of my neck, he thrust it toward my face, rubbing it against my cheek.

“Put it in your mouth, Bucky. I want you to suck it.”

I closed my eyes and felt his thickness entering my mouth. I tasted nothing, but smelled the stench of sweat, urine, and grimy clothing.

“Watch your teeth,” he said sternly. “Cover your teeth with your lips.”

He clutched my head with both hands and rhythmically pumped my face. I kept my eyes closed and pictured the cooked turkey neck bone that my mother would boil early on Thanksgiving morning. I remembered how she would keep the giblet water to mix with her dressing and let me pick the meat from the bone. The liver and double-lobed gizzard resting untouched on the plate. A turkey neck bone in my mouth. In the distance, I could hear Oak and Belle baying in unison. A coon up a tree.

Gran’s legs shook and he started to moan loudly. His choking fluid filled my throat, causing me to gag. I fell to the ground and vomited onto the grass. Gran lifted me to my feet and led me to the truck.

“You just sit here and be still. I’ll go fetch them dogs,” he said, walking away from the truck.

Gran stopped and turned back to face me.

“This here is our secret. Understand me boy? If you ever tell anybody, I’ll kill them hounds as sure as I’m standin’ here.”

I nodded and leaned my aching head against the truck door until I fell asleep. I woke the next morning, a hangover headache, fully clothed, and in my own bed. I wondered if it had all been a dream. But it hadn’t been. Oak and Belle bellowed a chorus in the yard beneath my bedroom window. I rolled out of bed and looked down at them chained to the large ash tree in the front yard. Father yelled up the stairway.

"Buck, you get down here and feed them damn hounds. They've been raisin' hell all morning. Get your Sunday clothes laid out. I promised your mother I'd drop you off at Sunday School."

* *

A coon growls like a dog when it's cornered, eyes bulging, hair standing on end, ready to fight for its life. I clung tightly to the giant cottonwood. Vodka sweat dripped from my forehead. The bright beams from the flashlights flicked and danced like ghosts off the tree and around my head. The trapped coon's eyes shined in the light. Up close, it looked small, angry, frightened.

"Come on Buck," said Father. "Grab the damn thing and throw it down so we can start huntin' again."

"Maybe he's afraid to touch fur, Penny," said Gran laughing. "He ain't never had a girlfriend yet."

I looked down at Grannie on the ground below. His large jowls shook as he laughed at his remark. A rolling belly laugh followed by a high-pitched giggle. I had never met anyone who was so easily entertained by his own stupidity.

I grabbed the coon's closest hind leg and suddenly jerked it. The coon's front paws clawed into the tree bark as it attempted to maintain its position. I could see its eyes. It turned to snap its teeth into my wrist.

"Whew buddy. He got it loose," yelled Gran.

The small coon flailed in midair and I pitched it downward toward the aggravating voice that I knew I would hear for the rest of my life.

The angry coon hit its target, landing on the chest of Granville Montgomery. His squinty eyes widened as he realized that the coon was tussling and biting the front of his bib overalls. Oak and Belle followed the scent of the coon and sprang upon Gran, knocking him backwards to the ground. Gran shrieked a high-pitched scream. Oak and Belle quickly engaged in the fight. Their muzzles snapped ferociously until Oak sank his teeth into the coon's neck, snapping it. He dragged the coon's limp body over to the base of the tree. I climbed to the ground.

"Jesus Christ, Granville!" said Father. "You screamed like a goddamn girl."

"Looks like he might have wet himself, too," said Lawrence, chuckling as Gran rose to his feet.

Gran stood and stared at me. I took the dead coon and handed it to David to put in the gunnysack.

"I ought to knock you on your ass for that," said Gran. "You done that on purpose."

Gran stepped toward me, his fists clenched, a scowl crossing his pumpkin face. I smirked. He approached me for a fight.

"That won't happen," said Lawrence, stepping in front of Gran with his rifle across his arms. "You're the one who wanted that coon thrown down. Buck just did what you wanted him to do. Now, drop it and go on home."

"That's right pisspants. Go on home and change into a dress," said Father. "Buck did what you told him and we got more coon to hunt. Screamin' like a girl and pissin' your pants. Never seen such nonsense from a grown man."

Gran turned and stomped off into the darkness. It was the last time I saw him alive.

"Danny, if you ever get a notion to sell those hounds, let me know," said Lawrence.

We walked off together into the timber. The dogs bounded far ahead, once again in pursuit.

"I'll keep you in mind Lawrence," I said. "I'll definitely keep you in mind."

RIVER

Gaylord "David" Martin

A man don't always know things the world says he should know. Books and numbers, I never understood them. I learned the ways of the river; ran to her; with her, like she was my mother.

River taught me what I needed to know to live in a world that ain't fair or kind to people like me. A world where the hot sun spoils your ice cream before you can eat it, making it no good in no time. I found the river when I moved to the farm to live with Aunt Millie and Mister, Uncle Sherman that is.

Mister is what I called him. He didn't like me calling him that, but he didn't like Uncle neither. He said, "You call me sir, boy." I called him Mister. After my momma got killed in a car wreck, Aunt Millie insisted they take me in, give me a home, be a big brother to her and Mister's sons, Richard, Donnie, and Buck. Momma drove into a bridge rail south of Shannon City on a gravel road. Her car split down the middle on the front end. The sheriff in Union County found her laying in a creek, halfway in the water and her legs and feet sticking up on the bank. That's what I heard someone say after her funeral, when everyone sits around and eats sandwiches and cake and drinks coffee and talks and seems like they forgot they was even at a funeral.

I never knew my dad. Momma would say that he traveled selling things on the road. Said he was a good looker, like me. That's what she'd say, before she died. That happened in the late spring of 1969 and I was only seventeen. It was before Gunder and the horse died, before Richard died and went to heaven on Christmas Day, before I grewed up and went over to the war. So, I moved in with Aunt Millie and Mister. I did what chores and work Mister

told me to do, like shoveling manure out of the hoghouse and scooping ear corn into the feed grinder and gathering eggs and feeding the chickens and throwing hay to the cattle and stacking straw and hay. I done the work that he told me to do, mostly his work. Everyday after school, Mister'd yell—Gaylord, let's go find you some shit to shovel before suppertime. And he always did.

I fell in love with the river at the farm. River was down through the pasture, across the bottom forty, in through seventy yards of timber. There she lay, charging with power, yet still and quiet like a sleeping deer. The river was my world. I knew the way she flowed, her fishing holes, how she'd suck things down and spit them out miles away, where she let the deer drink from her soft spots so that they could hear what's around them. I ran that river alone. I cut away from the farm at night; school during the day. River never called me moron, never reminded me of my being a bastard.

I never told no one this. But I believed that people lived underneath the river. Not just under the water, but way below the muddy floor that held it. I don't know why I thought that, but it seemed to make sense to me after watching things float past—leaves and trees branches, sticks and fish and dead animals.

One day a long time back, I saw a man float by in a canoe. I was a sitting up on the high rock when he passed through. I wondered if he could have been my dad, selling things to people who lived on the river. I called out to him, saying hey mister, you out selling on the river? The water carried him downstream. He never answered.

This morning, my last morning on her banks, I reached down into the river and pulled the bobbing milk jug from the water, a large channel cat made croaking sounds as its whiskers bristled in the air. I took the small, short shank hook from its lip and tossed the fish

back into the water. Threading the milk jug onto a strand of twine looped through my belt, I walked down the bank, a train of plastic jugs trailing behind me. I wouldn't never leave a fish to die hooked by the lip to a jugline. That'd be a cruel death, not fit for no creature.

I looked upstream around the bend in the river. I could see the spot where the strong current had beat the earth smooth. The clay and rock bank high above the water. Tree roots sticking out from the dirt, looking like shriveled up arms of some dead person. But, I'm used to seeing things like that.

I stared at the big rock across the river. The rock used to make me feel safe when I first came down to the river. I remembered it being stuck in the hillside, six feet high, its large flat crown covered with river grass and scrub weeds, a safe place for me to sit. Now, it's just a rock, a big one that won't move. And it's been eight years since I first come to this river and sat on the rock. And now, eight years later, Momma's still dead, Gunder's still dead, Richard's still dead, fought the war in Vietnam and come back to find the river's water ain't never going to stop. None of it. I can't make none of it stop in my head.

The last milk jug bobbed in the current. Tethered to an overhanging branch, it dipped hard into the water, thrashing back and forth, staying down until the catfish could no longer resist. I stood and watched the rock. The milk jug finally went still. I bent down and lifted it up.

"Mr. Catfish, today's your day. No cornmeal, hot oil for you. I'll throw you back. Nobody'll eat you. I'll take the fishhook out for good. After today, this river is your river. It ain't mine. That rock of mine can be safe shade after today. I loved that rock the way you love them downed trees in the river, a place to hide so bigger fish can't eat you. Go on now."

Standing on the bank made me remember back to the summer before Richard died, the summer I came to the farm when I was seventeen. Momma had just died and I didn't want no one to think I was a scared of anything. I told Richard, Donnie, and Buck to meet me down at the river after school. They brought cousin Maze Montgomery with them.

"Hey Richie, your goddamn moron cousin skipped school again," said Maze. "You better tell him the truant officer'll take him to Eldora Training School if he keeps it up."

Maze was huffing for air when he caught up to the boys down on the bank. I stood in an ash tree overhead.

"Why don't you tell him yourself," said Richard, pointing up at me high up in the tree.

"Jayzus Christ," said Maze. "Look at that fucking retard up in the tree!"

I let out a war cry and shimmied down to a branch about six feet overhanging the river. Maze stumbled backwards like he weren't for sure what I was going to do. I hung on the branch and beat my fist on my chest like Tarazan.

"I called you all down here to watch me cross this here river," I said. "I figured how to get over to the big rock near the bend without drowning."

Their eyes got real big and their mouths dropped open like circles. They stood there watching me, not saying a word.

Now the big rock was something no one could get to without a boat and motor. It's near five foot tall and bigger than six foot wide, jammed deep into a hillside that no man can walk down without falling into the river. I'd spent days watching the river current, figuring how I might swim across without getting sucked under. One day, I threw a stick in. I watched how a crosscurrent carried it over to the main channel. The main channel hurled

that stick right into the riverbank at the bend, about a yard away from the big rock. I sat in that tree throwing stick after stick, each one ending up right near the other. So I says to myself, if I were to throw into that river in a cannonball, catch that crosscurrent to the channel, I'd end up at the rock, not dead and drowned ten miles away like Mister always warned.

"A man can't swim that channel," Mister'd say. "Your arms and legs dangling to where them underwater devils can grab onto your ankles or wrists and pull you into their black beds."

I used to dream about the underwaters. They seemed like monsters sleeping under your bed. You know they was there even if you'd never seen them. I figured a way to beat them, to cross the river without getting taken under. Over and over I told myself—gotta keep them knees tucked tight, arms wrapped around to make a ball, like one of them big red and white plastic bobbbers.

And so I stood there on that branch. Richard, Donnie, Buck, and Maze Montgomery watched me, waiting for me to let go.

"You can't do it David," yelled Richard. "You'll end up drowning!"

Richard's voice sounded scared. I'd never heard him sound that way before. He was always the confident one. He was my best friend even if we was cousins. He was like Aunt Millie. He stood up for me, helped me with school. He wouldn't cow down to Mister until he felt the backhand. His eyes seemed like they'd burn holes through that old pigshit-covered chore coat Mister wore.

"That dumbshit's gonna jump in the river," said Maze.

"Don't do it David!"

Richard yelled again. Buck and Donnie echoed him. I turned away from them and let go of the tree branch.

JUMP clear, legs tucked, arms wrapped. Dark coldness turned to light. Trees above. Listening to them scream. Buck crying. Gonna be in trouble. Relax, don't panic, enjoy the ride. Open your eyes, brace for the clay...

I was there, climbing out of the water, sunlight shining off my water-soaked arms and legs like a smile. I whooped and scrambled up onto that rock, stood wet there in the cool air, both arms high over my head. I turned to them, their mouths a hanging wide open.

"No one can touch me," I shouted that morning. "I ain't a moron. I ain't a bastard. I'm free!"

But that ain't this morning. That was eight years back. And nobody lives under the river like I used to think back in them days. And everything keeps flowing past. Dying off and floating away. Except Mister, he ain't dead; seems like he won't never die.

* *

Everything changed after Richard died on Christmas morning back in '69. That was the day "Richie went to heaven." I'd just walked up from the river that morning when I saw a strange car driving up the road. It was the man carrying Mister back home from the hospital to tell us all that Richard had died. I don't remember much from that Christmas morning, except for everyone crying and crying and crying. After that day, it seemed like a spring in a tractor had busted and nothing in the family worked right anymore. I dropped from school, even though Richard had told me never to do that. He'd said, you just got to hang in there, David. You graduate this spring. I'll help you get through. But, he was gone and I felt lost. I quit school and joined the army.

I enlisted on March 15, 1970. I'd hoped they'd take a moron dropout like me. It was the least I could do to make Richard proud. Not Mister. I hadn't spoken a word to him since that day. I watched him crawl in through the neck of his whiskey bottle and stay there. It was the best we'd gotten along since I'd come to the farm.

The morning I left, Aunt Millie took me down to the bus station with my duffel bag. She put her arm around my shoulder and waited as this big fellow in an army uniform called off my name. We all looked nervous, all of us guys sitting waiting for our names to be read off, like we were waiting to see the school principal. Mothers crying, fathers shaking hands, looking down. Aunt Millie looked into my eyes, her eyes calm and clear.

"I love you David," she said. "I'll pray for you every day."

I hugged her like I'd never hugged anyone. I turned away, climbed into my seat on the bus. I looked straight ahead. Everyone was quiet, waving back at the people outside the bus. I knew if I looked at her, I'd be off the bus and running, holding her hand. I didn't want to look babyish. So, I sat there, my eyes fixed on the guy's back in front of me. I dreamed in my mind I was watching the river flow by. I could see myself a standing on the rock just a waiting my time to take a plunge.

When I joined the U.S. Army on March 15, 1970, I landed in a world of more pain. It was a place where we all looked pretty much the same. We ate together, showered and slept in the same big room together. We talked "Yes sir and No sir," to the sergeants or anyone wearing more stripes on their sleeves. And I got used to all the standing in line, the twisting around, the being shouted at. Your goddamn gig line ain't straight private. That's not your

gun, it's your rifle. Who swiped my cigarettes? Charlie won't be shooting rice at you numbnuts, so keep your head down. Where's your goddamn brain, Martin?

The one thing Mister done for me, the one thing the Army never showed me for real until it was too late, was killing. It happened during supper after evening chores one night in the fall of '69. We was sitting around in the kitchen. Mister stared across the table at me.

"Gaylord, you get them chores done like I told you?" he asked. "You knock that sick hog in the head like I said?"

"What's that, Mister?" I asked. "I guess I forgot."

"Goddamn it, city boy," he said. "You go out and take a ball-peen hammer and knock that downed pig between the eyes."

So, I went out and found the half-grown barrow pig a laying on its side out there, barely breathing, eyes closed in a dark corner. I swung down hard against its head. The hammer thudded and the pig's head made a cracking sound. First hit knocked out its eye. It lay there jerking, searching for the light. I kept swinging, hit after hit to its head. And then stillness. A dead hog laying there in its own blood. There ain't no such thing as a quick kill.

In the army, all the talk and threats about killing didn't make it real neither. All the stories about the big war, the battle of here or there; places you never heard of, people you never known. Nothing broke through to me about war until I saw another man's blood for the first time and heard the sound of his last breath.

In December 1970, we flew from Fort Campbell, Kentucky to the state of Washington and then on across the water to Vietnam. Being in country is what they called it.

Hot and sometimes rainy. We stayed on a base in the south part of the country until command decided where we was going to end up.

On January 3, 1971, we all found out where we was heading. Our company choppered into Firebase Mary Ann in Quang Tin Province. They sent us in to relieve some of the men, who'd been there awhile, mostly boys who was heading home for good. There was talk the war was about over. Nixon was fixing to pull us out of this crazy place. I never knew who to believe or listen to, except for when I was being told what to do by my squad leader.

I liked the chopper rides. Flying over the dark green, trees and water flashing by below. We moved so fast, I never knew where we was going or how much longer it'd take to get there. Most generally, we'd fly along the rivers, using them like a highway. I'd stare at the dark water snaking through the jungle and think back to my river on the farm. I'd see Aunt Millie and the boys in my mind. I'd wonder whether Donnie or Buck would be stuck doing most of the chores for Mister. Most likely both of them were stuck and I was glad I didn't have to shovel his shit anymore, or take any for that matter. Thinking about the river and the farm helped me forget where I was and how scared I'd get sometimes.

We was always hoping to find a cool LZ. The chopper pilots were good. They knew where the drops were hot or cool, but never cold. You could never figure Charlie wasn't there waiting, not showing his face. We'd fly in fast and drop and scramble for cover. Pick ups were the same. You waited under cover until you could hear the choppers, then high tail ass to the LZ.

Firebase Mary Ann was operated by the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, Americal Division. Our company commander, Captain Knight had been at Mary Ann since October of 1970. He and Captain Spielberg decided we wasn't shooting worth a shit, so they set us up to train in Quick Kill. Quick Kill was when you shouldered your rifle and fired in one smooth continuous motion, no more damn cowboy shooting from the hip. They said we missed 99% of our shots and Quick Kill was going to change all of those misses. They set up a firing range on the southwest slope of the base camp's hill. Captain's team worked with each squad, teaching us the motion, having us shoot into sandbags downrange.

Our base camp was set up on a hilltop, covering an area larger than a football field. I'd stepped it off at 125 yards wide by 203 yards long. A camp road ran from one end to the other, with a resupply pad in the center of the firebase. We had twenty-two conex bunkers buried just inside the perimeter surrounded by razor wire. The whole place was protected by guard bunkers and the coiled wire strung along the ground was rigged with claymore mines and trip flares. The razor wire around the camp reminded me of the rolls of barb wire we'd use to fence pastures back on the farm. Only this wire could rip a fellow to shreds if he got tangled in it.

The mess hall, ammo storage, mortar area, and the 155mm artillery were enclosed in the circle of bunkers. We reinforced all of the bunkers with cut logs and then covered them with sandbags to protect us from mortar fire, which had stopped since we had been there. Our battalion tactical operations center and the command post were at the north end of the camp. The east side of the hill had a gradual slope while the west side dropped sharply. It seemed secure enough to me and was a hell of a lot safer than walking patrols in the jungle.

The “high boys” gathered between bunkers 12 and 13, where the camp road led out to the trash dump. That’s what they called themselves. They’d wait until sundown, after evening messhall and then light up their hand rolled cigarettes, passing them amongst each other, telling jokes, laughing and carrying on. Trying to take the edge off, they’d say. I’d watch and listen to them, while I smoked my own cigarettes.

Pfc. Moore, a radioman from Detroit, would get high and walk around the group all night singing what he called Motown songs and calling everyone motherfucker. He walked past me, stopped, and grinned. His eyelids were barely slit open.

“Martin, you a quiet motherfucker,” he said. “You best go take a shower, your sweaty ass stank.”

We all laughed at the funny things he’d come up with and how he’d turn something serious into a joke.

“Course, on the other hand,” he said, smiling. “A sweating man’s a working man, and a working man is a man with money. And we all know women likes a man with money. So, motherfucker, you keep your sweating, stinking ass where it be!”

As the night went on, we’d crawl into our bunkers to sleep or wait our turn at guard duty on the wire. It stayed quiet most every night. Sometimes, I’d lay in my bunk and think about writing a letter to Aunt Millie or one of the boys. But, I never was good at putting words on paper. So, I’d doze off dreaming of the river and fishing and sitting on the bank watching the water. And each day and night in Vietnam flowed on just like that, until they all seemed to blend into one.

After five weeks at the firebase, we went out on fewer and fewer recon sweeps. Everyone said the war was almost over. We knew it and Charlie knew it. I guess after so many years of war everyone had had enough of the killing and craziness. Some of us would sit around and smoke and tell stories about home and what we were going to do when we got stateside. The longer we were all together, the more we seemed like a family. I started thinking about how each person back on the farm had someone over here who reminded me in some way of them. There was someone like Donnie and Buck and Aunt Millie and even a few assholes like Mister.

One fellow, John Mahoney, reminded me of Richard. He was the kind of buddy who would watch your backside, who would fight and kill for you. He treated me like I was his brother.

Mahoney was a tall, lean, well-muscled guy. He was dark-tanned from spending almost a year in Vietnam before our company had gotten there. There was a long fresh scar that ran from the top of his hairline down to his right ear where he'd got hit by shrapnel from an RPG. He'd come to our squad a few weeks before we shipped out to Mary Ann. He had been a LRRP (Long-Range Recon Patrol). He was the only one of his team to survive a trip in the jungle up north across the DMZ. Battalion Command decided to have Mahoney join our squad and finish out his tour until April when he was scheduled to go back home. They said that made more sense than pairing him with another LRRP for the short amount of time he had left.

Most LRRP's were spookier than hell. They'd show up any time of day or night out of the blue, unannounced. They didn't report to no one on our base, except the person in the

Tactical Operations Center. They walked past regular infantry like we were Girl Scouts. They ate, slept, and talked alone or amongst themselves. When they left, they'd spray down with water and roll in the mud and dirt to put the smell back on, the smell of the jungle.

Nobody talked to Mahoney at first. They was afraid of him; what he'd seen and done. So, one day I caught his eye and he stopped and stared at me.

"I'm David Martin," I said. "Where are you from?"

He looked at me and smiled and stuck out his hand.

"John Mahoney," he said grinning, showing a big mouthful of white teeth. "I'm a damn ridge-runner from west of Asheville, North Carolina. Where are you from?"

"I'm from on a farm in Iowa," I said.

"Ioway? My daddy's sister lives in I-O-way."

From then on we talked, mostly about fishing, working on the farm, never about what he'd seen since he'd been here.

"David," he'd say. "When we get back home, you come down to North Carolina and I'll show you some real catfishing on a river."

John Mahoney seemed a lot like me. He knew fishing and working hard and running through the timber. But, most of all, he talked about how much he liked being on the river.

On St. Patrick's Day, 1971, we started carrying on in a big way. We drank beer and some got high and all of us were anxious to be done with our tour. Mahoney seemed to be the one most excited to be done. He kept a calendar near his gear and marked off each day as it came closer to April 10th, the day he was supposed to head home.

“Boys we’re going nonstop until the birds take us out of here,” he’d say.

I remember the first time I saw Charlie. Mahoney and I and two other boys was out in the jungle trying to find the Dak Rose Trail in an area where the Tranh and Nam Nim Rivers met. Charlie had been using the trail to run supplies and recon missions. We was ten clicks north of base camp. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move, like one of them shadows you see when you turn your head too quick. You think to yourself, did I see something. And there they were, black pajamas moving down the trail real quiet. It was like catching somebody doing something they weren’t supposed to be doing. I pointed them out to Mahoney. He raised his hand slowly and we all stopped. We nodded to each other. I heard his safety click off. I clicked mine off. We watched him and waited for him to shoot. They walked down the trail, away from us. He stood like a tree and never moved.

The night we got hit, we never saw it coming. Things had been so quiet and peaceful for so many days that I never even realized we was being attacked when it started. I thought it was a thunderstorm at first. There were a few brief seconds after the loud boom when the first grenade exploded and then I heard automatic rifles firing all over the base. We was all sleeping, most likely even the guards. We never saw Charlie sneaking up the base hill and we never heard them come through the wire. But, I saw blood that night. Death and bodies and blood. And it reminded me of killing chickens, the way Mister had us all do back on the farm in late summer.

Gaylord, get your ass up out of bed help us catch them chickens. They stood around the kitchen, knives laid out, butcher wrap in rolls with plastic. Aunt Louise standing, beehive hair, cigarette hanging from her lip. ‘Hope this don’t ruin my nails.’ Everyone laughs.

Three hayracks pulled in a circle around a fire, big black pot boiling water. 'This here rack's the plucking rack, this one's the gutting rack, and this one's for cutting and wrapping.

Mister pulls a tree stump over near an open area by the racks, with the Farmall M sputtering away. 'Sherman can't you get it closer to the plucking rack?' He glares cold whiskey stares at her. Old stump seen this game before, blood spattered, small white feathers buried deep in the crevices of its blackened table top. Nobody can read its rings, know its age, not with that much blood spilled over it. They stand there squinting in the bright morning sunlight, innocent, unaware, not moving just huddled as we stand laughing. Sharpen them knives, boys. 'Kenny ate so many beans and bacon last night, I couldn't sleep with the smell.' Everyone laughs.

'Let David kill the first one,' shouts Donnie. Mister bends down and picks a rooster from the grass. 'Grab the corn knife Gaylord.' Mister hands the chicken, yellow legs twisting, eyes squinting up at me, thrashing around, knowing it can't get away from me. I raise the corn knife high over head, my eyes on the innocent, unknowing eye blinks. Voices blur behind me. "Thwack." A crushed, severed beak, pieces of comb attached. No blood. I drop the bird, the knife. Bird runs over to the others, half its face missing, alive. 'Jesus Christ alive Gaylord, what'd you do, close your eyes?' Everyone laughs. Little Buck picks up the corn knife, grabs the faceless chicken, twists its legs 'til it stretches its neck onto the stump. One sudden shock. White feathers turn crimson red, the bird dancing on the ground, everyone cheering Buck, the brave little boy starts the long day off right. The process starts, chickens are grabbed, heads fly, blood spatters, still bodies are plucked and gutted. One head stares up from the ground, beakless, no longer in pain, its eye fixed on me.

The night Charlie sneak-attacked us, we slept well with no moon. The air reminded me of the river. It was damp, thick, and buggy. That night's hard to describe. It felt like a nightmare that wakes you in a cold sweat, or the way a lightning bolt and thunder strike shock you to your senses from a deep sleep.

I heard a muffled explosion, and then another. All at once, grenades started exploding all over inside the perimeter. Automatic rifles fired. Men screamed from their bunkers, Charlie's inside, Charlie's inside. CS gas burned my nose as I opened the door of my bunker. I heard a dull metal thud on the floor. I listened as it rolled toward Mahoney. He dropped to cover it in the darkness. I felt the blast push me into the blackness. I stumbled and fell into the trench near bunker 9. I tried to lay still. A small shadow ran up to me saying, GI, you alive, GI? He gave me a quick nudge kick to the ribs and took my wristwatch and rifle. They hit and ran, scattering around the firebase, throwing satchel charges into bunkers and shooting us as we came out to escape. Through the smoke I heard yelling and screams. In the trench, I felt their feet running past me into the stillness of the nearby jungle, 100 yards away from the wire. It was over—a quick kill.

The attack on our base camp lasted less than an hour. The NVA sapper company had snipped its way through our wire without being detected, without setting off any trip flares or claymores. They hit our command post and many of the sleep bunkers at the same time. When it was over, thirty of us was dead, including Captain Knight and my buddy Mahoney. Eighty-two was reported wounded. In truth, we was all wounded, laying out there in the darkness, hiding under bodies. Death had crawled into us; into the living.

Newspaper stories called it a massacre, said that our lack of response to the attack was the biggest black eye for the Army since My Lai. I tried to forget that night, tried to forget everything about that place, the way the air smelled and tasted, the way the dark green of the trees drew me to the river, reminding me of what I was missing at home, and how I never ended up fishing in North Carolina with Mahoney.

After the attack on Firebase MaryAnn, our company was reassigned to another base closer to Saigon. Six months later, we were heading back to the States. In the airport at Seattle, me and my buddy Jody Moore bought clothes and changed out of our uniforms in the airport bathroom. We ditched our uniforms, throwing everything Army in the trash. We had been warned that people on the street might yell or spit or curse at us for having fought in the war. None of us wanted any part of that. We'd already taken enough shit on our tour of duty. Me and Jody "Motherfucker" Moore walked out of that airport bathroom and headed to catch our flight to Detroit. It was his final stop and my connection to get back to Des Moines. We walked away like new people. He turned to me and grinned.

"Martin, we almost home," he said. "We's free motherfuckers."

I spent the next few years trying to make it on my own. I worked odd jobs all over Des Moines, but I could never hold one much longer than a few weeks. The V.A. Hospital helped me get into a shelter near downtown Des Moines. It was an easy walk over to the river and I spent most of my time fishing under the bridges and talking to other river people.

In the late summer of 1976, Aunt Millie asked me to move back to the farm in White Oak. Donnie had graduated, leaving Buck to help Mister do the farm chores. She said that Uncle Sherman was moving slower nowadays. My mind seemed like it moved slower. It

flowed smooth-like inside my head. I could remember things and see what I had done in the past but I couldn't say the words to match my thoughts. I knew what I wanted to say to people but other words would come out of my mouth, making crazy talk. And that's what Mister started calling me shortly after I got back to the farm—Crazy Talk. He'd say, Gaylord quit your goddamn crazy talk; or Crazy Talk, why don't you go unload them bales of straw in the barn. He never changed his ways, all of his mean talking and whiskey drinking. I knew him and me wouldn't last at getting along. Something had to change.

* *

This morning I walked in the kitchen and Aunt Millie was a fixing breakfast. I had dumped all of the empty milk jugs and twine and fishing line and hooks in the burn barrel behind the barn and started it afire on my way to the house. I poured kerosene on it and flicked a match to start it a burning.

I walked in the kitchen door from the porch and Aunt Millie looked older than I remembered her ever looking. Her hair had turned white. She walked slower, walked as though life had been drained from her.

“Morning, Aunt Millie,” I said. “Why's his chair like that this morning?”

“Catch any nice fish?” she asked.

I shook my head and touched the back of his chair.

“Mister here?”

I pointed to Mister's empty chair at the table. He hadn't been getting around outside until mid-to-late morning since I'd moved back. I usually got up and out of the house before

he could bother me. I'd do my chores and go to the river to check my trotlines every morning early before the sun came up. I spent most of the rest of the day staying where Mister wasn't at. If he was in the house, I was outside. If he was in his shop, I'd be in the barn or at the river.

"I think he walked down to the barn, David," she said. "He'll be back this way for breakfast soon."

I grabbed some toast and bacon and headed out the porch to the tool shop to find a nail to tamp my pipe. I opened the door of the shop and smelled his cigarettes and whisky coffee. He sat in his chair in a shadow next to the tool bench.

"Gaylord? What do you want?" he asked.

"Nail." I said.

He slowly ran his woodcarving knife down a cedar bough, dropping shavings on his work boots. Steam rose from his stained cup of coffee up around his white hair.

"How does it feel, Gaylord?" he asked. "Have you ever thought about that?"

"What Mister?" I asked. "What you...?"

"You simple bastard. You and your goddamn crazy talk," he said. "It's no wonder this country lost that war, sending potheads and morons over there."

I felt his words cut through me. His eyes seemed to stare inside me, looking to take and crush whatever all that death had left of me. My mind churned and no words would come from my mouth. I felt something rise in me as I stood to leave.

"How many you kill over there, Crazy Talk?" he asked. "You going to answer me or keep playing dumb? Oh, for Christ's sake, where do you think you're going?"

"River," I said. "Over to the river."

"Before you leave," he said. "Take that hammer and nail down that loose board on the chicken shed. You hear me Gaylord?"

I picked up the hammer behind him. He uncapped his bottle and poured whisky into his cup. I stood there looking at the back of his head, the steam of his black coffee, spirits rising from it. Its blackness reflected his eyes and the way he treated me and his mean nature in general. And in my mind, I could see my arm rising up behind him, and him being like that downed hog in the darkness. I could see the claw of that hammer sinking into his skull and the blood and brains dripping on his shirt and pants and chair. In my mind's eye, it all happened at once. But, I just stood behind him a thinking it, a wishing it to happen while he kept on sipping from his whiskey cup. I couldn't speak any words to tell him what I was a thinking. I dropped the hammer and ran from the shop up toward the house.

I smelled the plastic and twine and fishing lines and hooks burning in the barrel behind the barn, a small thread of white smoke a floating up in the air and drifting sideways to the porch steps. Aunt Millie smiled when I walked through the door. I hurried over and hugged her. I squeezed her and didn't want to let her go. She wrapped her arms around me and I thought back to the time when I left to go in the army. The way she held me for a few moments before I pulled away and got onto the bus. It was a feeling that I always wanted to have, the feeling of someone holding me. It reminded me of the way the river had once made me feel inside. But, no matter how hard I tried to connect the thoughts in my head to the

words a coming out my mouth, it never worked. Not after the war. Not after the dying and the killing I'd seen. The thoughts flowed. But my words came out like broken sticks that been sucked down and spit out of the river ten miles downstream on a mud bank. My crazy talk made no sense to nobody.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked. "What are you all worked up about?"

She cupped my face in her hands and kissed my forehead and I remembered my momma doing that when I was little, way before she died.

"You can stay here and wait for me to clean up," she said. "I'll take us into town and we'll do some shopping at the store."

"River's in the water and Buck away to go," I said, my words jumbling from my mouth.

"Are you going fishing again?" she asked. "I thought you'd already checked your lines this morning. Well, you go on and get done what you need to do."

I grabbed my chore coat and my pipe and my hat and my matches and my nail to tamp my pipe and I turned away from her for one last time. I could hear her stacking dishes and talking. She called out to me as I headed out the back porch into the farmyard.

"David, you be careful and get back in time for dinner," she said. "I'm fixing your favorite meal, fried fish and mashed potatoes. You hurry and get done down at the river, honey. And bring me back some more fish!"

"Fish are gone!"

I called out to her and walked quickly past the barn and through the gate of the pasture. I ran toward the timber, my heart a pounding. I dropped my hat. My pipe and matches fell into the weeds and I ran harder and faster and I knew she was waiting for me, quiet like a deer sleeping in the grass.

JESUS IN THE EIGHTH RACE

Danny "Buck" Martin

Never bet against Pat Day when he's riding at 8 to 1 or better. That wasn't one of Pete's rules, but if he were alive he would have put that one in his game book. Not that he had a real book of gaming rules, Pete kept those in his head, on the tip of his tongue, ready for whatever occasion popped up at the track. I adopted the Pat Day rule the hard way, watching dreams of green slip through my fingers when he rode Lil E. Tee, a 16 to 1 horse, through heavy traffic, shooting the gap, closing down the stretch, nudging my horse and money into fourth place to win the '92' Kentucky Derby. It happened repeatedly. I should have known that you could never count out a longshot, not as long as they have solid legs to run.

Pete would have known better. He always knew better, had those gut feelings, those mother-is-always-right intuitions. Pete would have said, "Waddya expect da guy rides with Jesus." Pat Day that is. I never had those feelings, those without-a-doubt wagers. "You need to lay off the booze kid," Pete would say. "Clear your damn mind, you'll get the touch. Hell, kid you're my nephew."

The touch. The luck of the Irish. For Pete, the touch meant a strong intuition, a feeling of contentment when he laid down two hundred on a race, cocksure of being in the money. It was his lifeblood, the thrill of knowing in advance the victor. Pete had the touch, a gift from who knows where, a knack for horses that allowed him to live modestly off his winnings at the track.

Pete was judicious about his gift. He guarded it; never abused it or became greedy over it. He used his gift sparingly as though he only had a limited number of win, place, and

shows in a lifetime. Above all, Pete was free with his tips and advice, tricks of the track he called them. I called them Pete's rules.

Never bet each race, a tough rule for amateurs (pros too) to get past. Pick your battles (races) wisely, determine your race or races before setting foot on the apron. Select races with high quality horses running. Go with Stakes, Allowances, then Claiming races, and avoid Maiden Special Weights-pure crapshoots. High purse races bring better horses. Never bet exotic wagers-trifectas, quinellas, daily doubles, pick six bets-the odds are stacked high against you. Stick with straight bets-win, place, or show-the odds are still tough, but manageable. Never bet by the name of the horse. Never bet simply on the name of a winning jockey, good jockeys sometimes ride shit horses. Combine the horse quality and the jockey quality as a mutual factor. Pick races with a field of more than eight horses, ten to twelve is best. Large fields pay better and spread the money around a larger pool. Never bet drunk. Never bet against...Pete's rules. He could fill a book.

* *

Twenty minutes to post time. Oh my god, what have I gotten myself talked into. I look around the group. Nice-guy Bob, whoever he is, walks over to introduce me to someone standing with the others. They're all smiling, talking back and forth, sipping coffee or lemonade. I feel like shit, my head's pounding, my hands shake. I need a smoke. I need to get out of here before they start.

"Hey Danny, are you feeling any better?" says Bob. "You had a rough one last night. Do you remember me finding you in the bathroom at Perkins?"

So, that's how I got hooked up with this guy. Man, I must have been wasted last night.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks for putting me up," I say. "Hope I wasn't a bother, maybe I should..."

"Oh no, you weren't a problem at all. I'm sorry to drag you to this meeting," says Bob. "I mean, I'm not trying to recruit you or anything, but I had to be here and I didn't want to leave you sleeping in a strange house. You know Danny, we've all been down that road before."

He smiles. I couldn't help but like the guy. They all sit down, then someone starts talking. I want out of this room, away from these people, their voices vibrating in my head. I need to make some money. I need to have a drink, grab a smoke, the Racing Form, head to the track, clear my head. Shit.

"My name's Martha. I first realized I had a problem when I started drinking wine everyday at lunch. One glass, then two. Cocktails before, then after dinner. I'm thankful I found a great bunch of people like you all. You've been so supportive. I'm just sorry that it took me until now..."

Come on Martha cut the shit, I need to get out of here. Can I sneak? They're watching me. They can't wait for their empathy orgasm.

"Thank you for sharing Martha. You know we're here for you. We're proud of how far you've come. Your sponsor Betty is always there for you. Anyone else like to share..."

I stand and face the group. They look surprised by my sudden move. They smile and listen.

“Yeah, hey, whoa. Man, this is intense. Uhhh, my name is umm, my name’s Danny Martin and I used to say the only time I had a drinking problem was when I couldn’t get a drink. No reaction. That’s a joke. No reaction. Bad joke, okay. A-n-nyway, I was thinking that...uhmm, listen Bob thanks for letting me crash at your place last night. I normally don’t pass out in bathroom stalls in Perkins, but...uh, I really think I need to get going. Thanks for the coffee, I’ve got to make a business appointment, you’ve been great. Catch you later.”

“Thank you, Danny. Dan... Danny, wait can I give you my card...we meet every night, I...”

* *

Drinking becomes a way of life. In my family, for me, it was inculcated early on so that my memory would preserve the process. Embedded into my very fiber of being so that I would never doubt my own destiny. My father was, as I am, a drunk. I call it a coward’s suicide, slow, methodical, and yet deadly. No jump-off-a-bridge mess, kiss the hot end of a gun barrel tragedy, just a slow degradation through pickling the brain, the liver. I blame no one for my choices, no one.

I left the farm at age eighteen with no skills outside of manual labor. My father was dying. He had insisted on spending his last months, weeks, days, whatever time he had left, in the hell he’d created. It was the summer of 1977. I was eighteen and ready to leave the farm. I had watched him die my entire life. I wasn’t interested in watching a story unfold, when I already knew its ending.

The spring of 77 was my coming of age. I possessed nothing except a penchant for reading, a keen taste for drinking and occasional drugs, and a powerful lust for women. I wasn't particular about the women who used me, but I found I was attracted to older women, to their skill and experience in bed. After my first encounter, I discovered that they were also more casual in their approach and departure from me. There was never crying before, during, or after sex, no empty promises of love forever and ever. I found that relationships with young women, women my age, came with strings attached, expectations. I soon learned that a morning of leaf raking for a widow or a wife whose husband was peddling products somewhere on the road could turn into an afternoon of writhing bodies, sweaty fluid-stained sheets, and I, young Oedipus, bidding goodbye to my substitute Jocasta.

Mrs. Jameson was my first real woman. A forty-five year old widow with no children. Her husband had died suddenly of a brain aneurysm in the fall of 1975. She had asked my mother if I might be available to help her do some late spring cleaning, hang window screens, rake dead grass, till her garden, and any other chores she might think of. I started working for her the first Saturday in May, three weeks before my graduation, my ticket to freedom, my flight away from family, the farm, the struggle that I had lived with, the struggle that I hoped would soon end.

I couldn't remember her face until the morning that I showed up on her front porch. I knocked on her screen door, flannel-shirted, worn bib overalls, leather gloves hanging from my back pocket. She opened the door and smiled. I had seen her before at the library, working part-time putting return books away. She was wearing a loose yellow sundress, no shoes.

"You must be Daniel," she said.

“Danny,” I answered. “What’d you want me to start with?”

She pointed to the large stack of black, wood-framed window screens.

“I want you to wash those screens and hang them. There’s a ladder in the barn.

You’ll need to climb on the porch roof to hang the upstairs bedroom windows. Yell if you need help. I’ll fix up some ice tea for lunch.”

I watched her walk away.

The morning’s monotony pressed on. The sun came out in full force. I stripped the cotton flannel off and climbed onto the roof to hang the final bedroom screens. I looked down the long farm lane, out across the fields with rows of new corn popping through the black dirt. I watched a hawk circle above the timberline, which runs along the river. It was quiet on Mrs. Jameson’s farm, peaceful, relaxing.

“Come down, have ice tea,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am. Let me finish hanging these last two,” I said.

I looked down at her, hands on her hips, a gentle smile on her face.

“Be careful on the ladder,” she said. “And call me Ellen.”

I climbed down from the roof, wiped the sweat from my face, and followed her into the kitchen. She picked up a sweating glass of tea, lemon slices swirling in the brown liquid. Placing it in my hand, facing me, standing close, she watched me gulp its coolness in seconds.

“May I have more?” I asked.

She took the glass from my hand and set it on the table. Her eyes locked on mine. She placed my hand on her breast. I could feel the damp coolness from where she had held the glass as she pulled my face to her lips. We kissed in the kitchen. The birds outside faded

into breathing and heartbeats. She unfastened my overall straps, watched them drop to the floor as I stepped away from them. She grabbed me, gently pulled me down the hallway to her room, and led me like an elephant into a circus tent.

I returned each day after that to do more work. Ellen began to look younger. I didn't see her as a forty-five year old librarian anymore. I saw her as a woman who needed me as much as I did her. Then the relationship stopped, as suddenly as it had started. She paid me one hundred and sixty-seven dollars. I was finished with Ellen.

* *

I lurch forward, awakened by a loud thumping sound on the car window. My clothes soaked in sweat, I rub my eyes trying to clear the fog in my brain. Who the hell? What's this guy want? Where the hell...?

"Danny, Danny wake up. What are you doing in my car? It's over a hundred degrees in this... I thought you had a business appointment, ya said you couldn't stay for..."

"Bob, it's Bob right?"

"Yeah Danny, it's me, Bob."

"Whew, fuck I'm hot. What time is it?"

"It's 3:15, you left the meeting over an hour and a half ago, you said you had a business meeting."

"Goddamnit, I missed post time. Can I bum a smoky treat?"

"What? Oh, a cigarette. Sure. What post time? Danny, what are you talking about? You don't have any money."

“The Florida Derby. I’m putting three bills on RosieintheSky. *RosieintheSky with diamonds, diamonds in my hand, greenbacks in my pocket.*”

“Listen, I’m taking you to the hospital. You blacked out, crawled into my hot car and passed out. Jeez, you’re lucky you’re alive.”

* *

On July 1 1977, I packed what little I owned and left Des Moines on a Greyhound bound for Omaha. The day before, we’d buried my cousin David in the Fjeldberg cemetery. They’d fished David out of the Des Moines River a few days earlier. We’d watched Channel 13 News on the scene describe the gruesome discovery, “a man, a John Doe was discovered floating in the Des Moines River below the Scott Street Bridge and investigators say the body has been in the river for several days. More on this story at 10:00.”

I gripped the handrail as I stepped onto the bus, the same way I had locked onto his casket the day before. The cool metal in my palm, its unforgiving attachment, the permanence of my decision to leave, of David’s decision to escape.

I stepped off the bus at 72nd street in Omaha and walked the remaining mile to Pete’s house. Pete lived in a small green house in an older neighborhood near the racetrack. He was the most normal person in our family, normal from my perspective. He was my mother’s stepbrother, married and divorced three times. He had no job, no desire for one, and lived by his wits.

I admired Pete. He had carved out a simple quiet existence, one in which he found happiness handicapping horses for profit, hustling pool, and sitting on his front porch

smoking, reading, and playing dominoes with his neighbor Emil. Pete no longer drank. He had given it up after repeated arrests for drunk and disorderly conduct.

"I gave the shit up," he'd say. "A man only needs one vice, mine's the ponies, you oughtta try it."

Pete understood horseracing. He was a natural at looking at the program, then watching the horses in the paddock, how each moved, which jockey was riding which horse. He mentally checked each factor, chomped down on his Phillie's Blunt, looked long and hard at the Racing Form. He would fish into his bank account, a silver horsehead money clip.

"Buck," he'd say. "Put this hundred to show on the 3 horse. Goddamn horse is way undervalued on the board."

I ran the money and tickets for Pete. It was the least I could do to pay him back for putting me up over the summer. I'd grab a beer on the way back before the race. He'd remain planted at his table overlooking the paddock. Jockeys would look up, smile, and give a nod of acknowledgement. Pete sat oblivious, smoking his cigar, sipping his coffee, carefully watching the horses enter the starting gate. He said you could tell a lot about a horse before the race by its reaction to the gate. A good horse, an in-the-money horse, did not act up once pointed toward the gate. It may prance and dance sideways in front of the grandstand while on parade, but when the horse sees that open chute, hears the familiar sound of metal snapping shut, the good horse walks forward, ears upright, nostrils flaring, ready to run.

"Buck, you need to slow down on the beers, you're getting sloppy drunk. I don't want you to mess up a bet."

I nodded, handed him his winnings from the previous race, and the ticket for the final race. I could feel the swirling buzz, the full feeling in my head making me want to lie down. I sat with my head in my hands. I listened to the sounds of a waning crowd, the jockeys and stewards talking, the roar of the tractor working the track, and Pete puffing on his cigar looking like Buddha in a porkpie hat.

“Who do you think you are fucking Buddha?” I said.

* *

Broadlawns hospital. When you have no money, no insurance, no real prospect for paying the bill for the treatment you need, you go to Broadlawns, the county-run hospital in Des Moines. They're used to people like me, they've seen thousands of us come and go through their doors, and yet they remain open, willing to help.

“Mr. Martin, I have some paperwork we need to fill out. Name?”

I can tell by looking at this woman that she's a no-nonsense, don't-waste-my-time buster, give-me-the-information sort of nurse. I snap to attention under her steady gaze. Bob sits quietly in the corner of the waiting room making sure that I stay-the-course. I think that was the expression he used on our drive down here.

“Danny Martin,” I say.

“Martin, Daniel. Address?”

“Uhhh...well, I...”

“Ma'am, you can use my address,” Bob says. “He's been staying on and off with me, lately. It's 4925 Franklin, Des Moines, 50310.”

“Your name and relationship to the patient?”

“Bob, uhhh, Robert Lovin. I'm a friend. No relation.”

"Date of birth?"

"October 21, 1959."

"Social Security number?"

"Shit, I uhh, I don't remember it. I mean I have one..."

"Don't you have a driver's license or photo ID in your wallet?"

"Hell, I don't even have a wallet. Lost it."

"We'll come back to that. Employer?"

"No. I mean I'm not working."

"Reason for admittance to Broadlawns?"

"I'm a fucking drunk, I guess. Isn't that right, Bob?"

"You're an alcoholic, Danny. You're here for help."

"Okay, Mr. Martin. Dr. Chiodo will be giving you a full exam. Then, we'll get you set up."

"Bob, can I get some of your cigarettes?"

"Sure, Danny."

* * *

Pete and I lasted the summer of 1977, barely. One day in late August, I repeated the wrong horse's number at the betting window. It was the last race of the day, the last race of our life together. My head was full of booze. I walked away from the window, a three hundred-dollar show bet on the seven horse in hand. I handed Pete the ticket. His brows furrowed, mouth pinched, jaws clenched. He glanced at the tote board reading 25/1 on the seven, at his program with number eight circled boldly, then exploded. "Goddamnit Buck,

you fucked this up. I told you the eight horse, the fucking eight horse. You're a damn drunken disgrace to your mother."

"Fuck you Pete." That was all I could say to him because he was right. I turned away and staggered back to his house.

I packed my bags and headed for the downtown area of Omaha with sixty-four dollars in my pocket. I woke up the next morning outside, lying near a row of shrubs behind the Catholic Church.

After leaving Pete's, I bummed around the downtown, hustled pool, which I played well drunk or sober, picked up odd jobs and even odder women. I shared my body with older women for a place to sleep at night. Hard women who sat in bars drinking during the day, women who, like me, had a problem and wanted to feel alive through mixing flesh and body fluids like an elixir. It became a strong potion that we needed to recapture whatever it was we had lost somewhere in our lives. I lived that way for the next few years.

AkSarBen was dying a slow death. The crowds got smaller. The horses were lower quality. The place only attracted tourists from out of town and the remaining faithful. There was talk of closing the track.

I quit going to the track during the spring of '82. Pete had died that winter. He had slipped on his front porch steps, cracked his head, and died from exposure. Emil, his neighbor found him lying in the snow.

Our relationship had ceased after our first summer together. He and I still went to the track until he died, just never together. I knew where he sat and always kept an eye on him from a distance. Sometimes, I never even bet. I just sat and watched Pete. I would picture myself walking up to him, handing him a winning ticket, a three hundred-dollar win on

number seven in the eighth. But, it never happened, only in my mind. He remained a dependable fixture in my life. He sat in his spot near the paddock. I watched from the grandstand. He made his money. I lost mine. He drank his coffee. I drank.

I moved back to Des Moines in the winter of 1983. Not much had changed from when I left except for a new racetrack that was opening east of the city. I found an apartment on the eastside of Des Moines. I should say my brother Donnie found the apartment for me. He was my only contact to family. Donnie had made something of himself. He graduated from high school, went to college and got a degree. He started working as a horse trainer, traveling a circuit that had him living in Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. His life snapped together like a puzzle with all its pieces fitting together. Donnie had written to me saying he thought I should move closer to home. He said that he looked forward to making up for lost time if I moved back, whatever that meant.

Father had been dead for two years. I didn't find out about his death until six months after he'd been buried because no one knew where to find me. At the time, I wouldn't have much cared anyway.

My mother lived alone, still out on the farm. She rented the farm ground to a neighbor. She raised her garden, a few dairy goats, and kept one horse to ride. It was an eight year old Tennessee Walker mare that she'd picked up at a sale. It took me a few months to get up the nerve to go see her, but eventually I did it. She was glad to see me again. There were hugs and tears and she allowed the past years, the time that I'd been gone from the family, to remain passed in time. And for that, I was thankful.

* *

The words an alcoholic never wants to hear come quickly, faster than the brain can process, better yet, faster than the brain can rationalize and put into some overall perspective on life and death.

“Mr. Martin, your liver enzyme level is far higher than what’s considered normal for a forty-three year old. It indicates the onset of liver degeneration, possibly cirrhosis. How much are you drinking a day?”

“Oh, I dunno. Fifth, sometimes two.”

“It comes down to this, you either quit or you’ll die. It’s your decision.”

So, I’m here, in some alcohol treatment rehabilitation thing in Broadlawns hospital. A four to six week program. They call it detox. First week is hell. Crying, shaking like a leaf, you can’t hold a cigarette or a glass. If you could die you would. They say some do during withdrawal.

Bob comes everyday with cigarettes for me. He spends money from his own pocket on some drunk he found in a bathroom stall in Perkins. He says he’ll be my sponsor when I get out, my angel more like it. Donnie comes on the weekend to visit. He says he’ll help with rent and the other basics until I get back on my feet.

After the physical shit lets up, after the edginess settles like dust in the corner, we start talking in group sessions. We’re a sorry looking bunch, especially us newcomers. Scared. Not knowing what’s coming next in this crazy journey. That’s why they say it’s so easy to go back to drinking, to go back to something familiar. We press on through hard questions about us, our families, those we’ve hurt, those who have hurt us. We tell our stories. We listen to other people share their lives. Crying. Everybody cries, even me.

One day, I'm not sure which day, everything clicked together, my mind, body, soul, emotions. Those parts of me, which had been disjointed and separated, felt whole again. It felt good, damn good. Scared and happy at once. So, I tell the group that's how I feel and someone else says that is how they felt two days ago. Someone else says, hey, I got an erection this morning. Nobody laughs at the person, and you think, wow, this is fucking honest.

I dream now. I don't mean—imagine-the-possibility type of dream. I mean going to bed tired, waking up refreshed, thinking-man that was a wild dream. I never did that when I was drinking. Back then, there was only fitful darkness.

The night before last, I had a dream that I was at Churchill Downs. I was a jockey. I wore pink and black silks. I walked out of the locker room area to the paddock with Pat Day, Eibar Coa, Jose Santos, Jerry Bailey, Patrick Valenzuela, and all of the rest of the jockeys. I towered over them at 6'2". People in the grandstand laughed and pointed at me. They said don't bet on him. He's a loser. He's never won a race. I mounted a tired horse, sway-backed, hardly moving. I looked like a bear on a scooter in the circus. People in the crowd laughed. I was led out on to the track, paraded around to the starting gate. A six furlong race, I was in the outside post position. The bell rang. The gates burst open. All the horses charged out, except mine. Pat Day looked back at me and rode away. I jumped off my horse. It was standing dead in the gate. I ran down the track on foot after them, brown rumps, brilliant silken colors rolling up and down into the distance. They disappeared at the 3/4 pole. I ran and ran for what seemed like hours. I was coming down the homestretch, running alone. The track was dark, the grandstand empty. I could see the lights of the finish

line come up as I approached. Pat Day was standing alone on the track in his street clothes.

He smiled at me. He said, "You made it Danny, good job." We walked away together.

LEGION

Millie Martin

I stared at Sherman's hand; up his arm. I could smell the disease that was eating up his body. It seemed to ooze from his pores. His jaundiced yellow appearance reminded me of everything that he had hated in the thirty-four years of our marriage. Cowardice. The enemy he fought during the war. The adversary that he never forgot, never forgave. The yellow scourge. The color he branded people that disagreed with him, those who showed any weakness in adversity. His bitterness toward life seemed to have turned inward and was gradually eating him from within. I slowed at the yield sign, and then turned right, pulling down onto the main street of Cambridge. The town was quiet on Saturday mornings. It was the kind of stillness and peacefulness that I'd hoped for on this visit to Doc Nordstrom's office.

Sherman moaned softly. He sounded like an injured animal in its final throes. He stared out the pickup truck window, clutching the right side of his belly. His left hand quivered on the seat next to me. I looked at the brick frontage of Doc's office. It hadn't changed, not in the forty-some years that I'd known Doc. I eased the pickup into a parking space near the front of the building. I studied the black wrought-iron head of a horse, mounted on a short post, standing guard near the front door. I had never noticed the horse head before. It reminded me of the stitched Blackhorse insignia on the closeted Army uniform from Sherman's days in the 11th Armored Cavalry. An angry, rearing black horse. I wondered if it was a manifestation, some sort of sign from God.

Sherman respected Doc. He appreciated Doc's sense of dedication to the people of the area, his loyalty to country people. Sherman often said that what made Doc Nordstrom a

good doctor was the fact that he never held his book learning above other people. I understood how Sherman felt and when he woke that morning vomiting blood, I knew Doc Nordstrom would be my only chance of saving him. The boys were gone, off living their own lives, unaware and most likely not caring what was happening to their father. Donnie had left to work for a horseman in Louisiana and Buck had vanished the day after we buried Cousin David six months earlier. I was alone with Sherman, alone except for God's Spirit.

I had started attending a Holiness Movement church in the home of Stanley Sydnese a few weeks after David died. I found comfort in the group; a peace that had been missing from my home and marriage for many years. Sherman never found out that I visited the church. He wouldn't have approved. I made excuses at first, telling him that I had to go sit up with Molly Thorton our sick neighbor. After awhile, I realized that by 8:00 at night he would be passed out from drinking and would never miss me.

I had always considered myself a God-fearing Christian. I took the boys to Sunday school when they were growing up. It wasn't until that first meeting in Brother Stanley's house. Everyone packed together. Friendly and welcoming. I discovered a new life; a holy spiritual dimension. A new baptism; not by water, but by fire.

That first night, the members of the fellowship stood over me. Stretched out on the floor of the large living room, sweat pouring from my forehead, they told me I'd been slain in the Spirit. I began speaking in tongues that evening and loved my new-found gift. Brother Stanley told me that the gift of tongues was God's special language for his people. Brother Stanley explained that tongues could be used in the group worship service followed by an interpretation. He said it was God's way of delivering a message to His people. He also said that tongues could be used by the believer as a personal way of communicating with

the Holy Spirit for personal edification. Now, at any time, whenever I needed God's comfort, I merely looked up, my mouth slightly agape, and exhaled gently. Strange-sounding, unintelligible words eased out like holy breath.

I shut off the engine and studied Sherman. He was breathing in a jerky, raspy motion that caused his body to shudder.

"We about there?" he asked. "'Damn truck ride near killed me. Felt every bump on the way."

He let out a slow, long sigh; then grunted. He sounded like a resting boar, one that had been kicked in the side to rise up to feed or to go breed a pen of gilts.

"We're here," I said. "I'll come round get you out. Keep your shorts on."

His hands were shaking and his breath smelled like rancid blood and vomit as I opened the door and he pitched his body toward the opening to get out.

He belched and then swallowed.

"What do you think Doc will say's wrong with me?"

"He'll tell you what need's fixing," I said. "What you need to do so you're feeling better."

"Jesus Christ woman, get out of my way. I can walk on my own."

He turned back into the truck and reached under the seat. He pulled out an empty pint bottle and then threw it to the floor of the truck.

"Goddamn it."

I stepped back. *Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain.* I wanted to tell him that, but kept silent. *Do not be unequally yoked to a sinner.* I had been married to Sherman for too many years to start preaching at him on this morning.

I walked toward the front door. Sherman shuffled slowly behind, holding his side. He passed me, while I held the door. I rubbed the head of the black horse mounted on the post near the entrance.

Doc's office never changed. Miss Hoffman the nurse, an older unmarried woman sat at the desk. Nurse, receptionist, and bookkeeper. She glanced up as we walked through the door. She had worked for Doc since the Korean War and knew the town and patients of the community. She seldom smiled, but remained distantly gracious as she checked our name from the logbook on the desk.

"Doc will be with you in a few minutes," she said. She turned and disappeared into the back room.

The office was empty, quiet like the rest of Main Street. An occasional car cruised past the front window. The stack of magazines never changed except for the covers. A water cooler hummed in the corner. Sherman shifted in his chair. The wood paneled walls, decorated with framed photographs of Doc's racehorses, unchanged over the years, bore tribute to his passion. A passion for performance and simplicity.

"Sherman, you can come on back. Doc will see you now."

Sherman rose from his chair. His face was blanched a yellowish-pale; his hands whiskey amber. I watched his movement, the slow motions of a man aged beyond his actual years.

"Stay here."

I smiled at the absurdity of his remark and picked up the Bible resting on the corner table. I had been reading the book of Job. My life seemed simple compared to God's servant Job. I looked up and the room was empty. I opened to the 19th chapter. *How long will you*

torment me and crush me with words? And after my flesh is destroyed I will see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me.

“Mrs. Martin, the doctor would like you to come back to the examining room. Mrs. Martin!”

I set the Bible back into its place, rose and walked toward the voice of the nurse. The hallway was covered with more pictures of horses. Doc had raised a number of winners from his original sire, Allydana, a Kentucky-bred stud that he’d purchased after the war. Doc’s horses were his pride and joy, much more so than the fact that he was one of the county’s first permanent doctors. A country doctor. One that the farm families felt comfortable visiting.

Doc stood smoking a cigarette in the doorway of his office, across from the examining room. A short, thick man, bald except for a narrow band of white hair that encircled the back of his head, he stood scratching his bull-like neck. He looked up when I came near.

“I want you in there when I talk to him.”

That was all he said to me as he stepped across the hall, opened the door, and ushered me into the room. Sherman sat twisted on a stool next to the examination table. He stared at the floor, not looking up as we entered the room. Doc pulled out a chair for me. He stood above us, glancing at an old framed photograph of Allydana on the wall.

“It’s like this. Sherman has a cirrhotic liver, possibly a cancerous tumor. I’m not sure without further tests. The main thing now is he has to stop drinking. I wanted to put him in the hospital to dry out. But Millie, he says he won’t have any of that. So, I’m recommending that he stay in bed for two weeks. No liquor, no activity and I’ll come out to

the farm a week from today, next Saturday, to see how his condition's changed. Do you both understand?"

I nodded. Sherman glared at the floor, not answering or looking up.

"Now if he doesn't stop, most likely he'll be dead in two weeks time."

Doc picked up a hypo and a vial from the counter. Drawing a dose into the syringe, he capped the needle and handed it to me.

"I've given him a morphine-based tablet for the pain. This hypo is a strong sedative. You feel comfortable giving him a shot, Millie?"

"I've vaccinated hogs and goats before. I can do it."

"The pill he's taken will make him drowsy," said Doc. "This shot will knock him out probably until tomorrow morning. It's going to be a rough road. I want you to call me if things don't go well. Anytime, day or night, understand?"

Sherman pushed himself to his feet.

"Take me home, now!"

I grabbed his arm to steady him. He pulled away and headed toward the door.

"Help him out to the car," said Doc. "Then come back in and I'll give you some more medicine."

I followed behind Sherman. He seemed determined to walk unassisted to the truck. I stopped at the door of office and watched him finish his trip to the pickup. He climbed into the passenger side, slammed the door, and leaned his head against the window. I walked back to Doc's private office. He counted out a supply of tablets, dropped them in the pill bottle, and snapped on a lid. He rose and opened the door to a storage cabinet and pulled out a vial of the sedative and a handful of syringes.

“Give him one tablet every six hours for the first three days and a shot of the sedative toward evening. This won’t be pretty, Millie. He’ll have the delirium tremens bad for the first couple days.”

“He’s had the jim-jams before. I’ve seen it.”

“Well, these will likely be the worst you’ve seen. If he gets out of control, if you can’t handle him, give me a call and I’ll be right out. At that point, we’ll have to take him to the hospital whether he wants to go or not.”

“Doc, we’ll beat this devil. We got the Lord on our side. Your healing hands and God’s healing power.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah well, just remember what I said. If it gets too bad, call me.”

I smiled, turned to leave, and noticed the old black-and-white photo of a horse hanging next to the light switch.

“Is that Allydoc, your chestnut colt from long time back?”

“You’ve got a good memory, Millie.”

“Well, you just remember Doc, I was the one who broke that two-year old for you, over 37 years ago.”

“I guess I’d forgotten,” he said.

“I guess you had. I’ll manage Sherman, fine. I’ll call you next Saturday to come out and check on him.”

I climbed into the pickup, started the engine, and stared over at Sherman. He was still awake though his eyes were closed. I wanted to reach over and touch him. I knew I had the healing power like Brother Stanley had once said. He always said that God’s children were

given different gifts—some to teach, others to speak prophecy, and for some the gift of healing. I switched on the truck's radio and set it to the country gospel station.

"You'll be singing to the Lord when this is all over."

I backed the truck out into the empty street and listened to the engine roar as we drove away.

"Quit that damn crazy religion talk. Shut that radio off and get me home."

Power, power, wonder-working power, in the bloooooood of the lammmb...

I leaned forward, increased the radio volume, and sang louder.

* *

I set the box on the kitchen table and began to look through its contents. I was sure I had found everything I needed in the tool shop. I checked the clock. Sherman had been sleeping for the past three hours. I had waited for an hour after we got home to go in and give him the sedative shot. I listened at the door. When I heard him snoring, I entered the room, lowered the waistband of his cotton briefs, and quickly injected the hypodermic. He flinched at the prick, but was too drugged to react.

I removed the coil of new braided barn rope. There was something about the aroma of new rope. It reminded me of hay-baling and of the large spools of baling twine. The smell brought back memories of past days when I would watch the men work at bringing in the newly cut alfalfa. Gunder, Sherman, and the other neighbors all worked together to put up the sweet smelling bales of freshness, each bound tightly by the crisp new golden twine. I laid the rope out on the table, measured a length of five feet, and then sliced through it. I repeated the process three more times until I had four uniform lengths of braided rope.

I pulled out the kitchen drawer near the sink and removed four white hand towels. I opened the pantry door and removed the bottle of vegetable oil, pouring a small amount into a small white creamer. I lifted the heavy white, Family Altar edition Bible from the reading table and set it on the table near the box, opening it to the 15th chapter of Luke. I began “reading red” as Brother Stanley called it, the red highlighted text that marked Jesus’ words in the text. The parable of the lost sheep. My mind focused on the final words of the section: *Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.* I flipped through the pages. It was the book of James, I thought. The verses Stanley quoted to the group before he laid hands on the sick to heal them. I found the passage. *Pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.* I carefully placed everything back into the box; the four pieces of rope, the hand towels, the creamer of oil, and the large white Bible; its pages edged in gold shining under the kitchen light. I lifted my face to the ceiling and opened my mouth before exhaling. *Baruch atta Adonai Elehenu melech ha—olem .*

* *

The room was dark when I entered at eight o’clock on that first night. Sherman’s body, motionless on the bed, reeked of sweat. The pungent odor of urine and soiled sheets greeted me. I gently tugged at the sheet under him, removing it and replacing it with a thick absorbent pad of batting. I placed the box on the floor near the foot of the bed and lifted a wash basin from the nightstand. My hands squeezed the soapy water from a washcloth and I gently cleaned his body. He groaned when the cool cloth touched his skin and then resumed

his slumber. I remembered Doc's instruction to keep him sedated. I lifted the syringe up to the light coming in from the hallway and pressed the plunger until a bead rose from the needle and fell onto his back. I felt the tug as the needle broke the skin. Sherman flinched.

"I killed a man." The words, muffled by his pillow and the thickness of his tongue, hung in the air. I placed the syringe in the drawer of the night table and waited. Lying on his back, he began breathing deeply.

"You killed more than one man. But, it wasn't you. It was Satan doing the destroying."

No reaction. I lifted the box and set it on the bed. I placed the large Bible near his head and then laid out the towels and sections of rope; one at each bedpost.

I gazed at his body; his belly bloated and distended, the yellow pallor of his skin, the hair from his legs worn off by overalls and age, and the thickened horn-like toenails and calloused feet. I wept. Large wet tears fell and rolled off of his skin. I kissed his feet and turned away from his vulnerability, before beginning the necessary work.

I started with his left leg, carefully positioning it toward the bedpost. I anointed his left ankle, marking the sign of the cross near his swollen joint. I prayed softly as I wrapped the towel around the ankle and snared the leg with a slip knot in the rope. I pulled it taut around the bedpost. No response. I continued with the right leg, repeating the ritual and then proceeded to secure his arms in the same manner. When I finished, I stepped back and looked at Sherman spread-eagled in the shadows of nighttime. I lay down on hard floor and placed a pillow under my head. I wanted to erase this vision from my memory and replace it with a dream of his redemption.

High mountain tenor. Lonesome and sad. His voice. The first time I heard him sing, I knew I wanted to sing with him. Sherman Martin.

The first time we met, Sherman and I, was at the 1940 Iowa State Fair. Uncle Gunder took me to the fair every year. It was a day I looked forward to each summer. Horse shows. Garden and flower exhibits. The midway, with a large Ferris wheel, that could carry a girl high above the fairgrounds, high above the life I lived on the farm.

I had packed a picnic basket for the day. Gunder and I planned to watch the horse show in the morning, stroll the exhibits, and then listen to the music show that night. Roy Acuff and his Crazy Tennesseans. Mr. Acuff was a new rising talent on the Grand Ole Opry. Gunder and I listened to him every Saturday night on NBC radio. Gathered around the radio after supper, we'd listen and eat popcorn, waiting for a song so I could sing along.

I've never forgotten that State Fair evening. The sun sank across the Grand Concourse, allowing the coolness of the summer evening to breathe new life into the fairgoers. We stood in line to enter the Grandstand, and then I saw him. I pointed him out to Gunder. Dressed in black trousers, a white shirt and tie, he stood next to a group of men holding their instruments. Fiddle, banjo, bass fiddle, two guitars, and a mandolin.

"Is that him?" I said. "Is that Mr. Roy Acuff?"

"No Millie," said Gunder. "That's the opening act. Local boys. Sherman Martin and the Warren County String Ticklers. That Martin boy is from Tennessee though. Works as a farmhand for Milton Tesdal in Cory Grove. Came to Iowa last year to work after his parents died. Milton's brother Homer is married to Sherman's aunt Ida"

"He's handsome," I said. "Hope he sings as good as he looks."

"I can introduce you to him," said Gunder. "I know Milton pretty well. Sold him that roan mare last spring, remember?"

"I'd be embarrassed," I said. "Hope he sings well."

He looked our way. Tall and thin, dark brown hair and blue eyes, a broad smile across his face. Gunder waved a hello. I looked straight ahead. But, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him nod his head and wave back. Then, he turned and walked toward the backstage entrance. The rest of the musicians, mostly older men followed him, taking the stage.

We sat close to the front. Gunder knew the man selling tickets in the box office. He bought the best seats that the man had left; third row, center of the stage. The crowd poured in around us. People from all over Iowa, who like us, had looked forward to seeing someone famous that we listened to on the radio. The lights came up. A man dressed in a suit and hat walked over to the microphone.

"Can you all hear?" His voice boomed out through the speakers. "Welcome folks. Welcome to the 86th annual Iowa State Fair. You all having a good time at the fair?"

The crowd cheered and clapped.

"Now, before I bring out Mr. Roy Acuff and his Crazy Tennesseans, I'd like you to give a warm welcome to a local group. Some of you might have heard of 'em. They'd like to sing some of your old favorites to start the night. Let's welcome Sherman Martin and the Warren County String Ticklers."

He was nervous. Smiling, waiting for the musicians to set up, and nervous. He strode over to the microphone, then stopped for a second before speaking.

"I, uh...we'd like to play you some old time songs. These fellows have been playing a long time together. I joined up with 'em to sing. I, uhh...come from Tennessee...and, uh...how about I sing 'Peace in the Valley.' Hit it boys."

Oh well, I'm tired and so weary

But I must go alone

Till the lord comes and calls, calls me away, oh yes

Well the morning's so bright

And the lamp is alight

And the night, night is as black as the sea, oh yes

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day

There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray

There'll be no sadness, no sorrow

No trouble, trouble I see

There will be peace in the valley for me, for me...

Sherman sang several different songs. The backup players played banjo rags and fiddle reels. Finally, they walked off the stage together and Roy Acuff and his Crazy Tennesseans came out. Mr. Acuff told the audience to give Sherman another round of applause.

"We raise good high mountain tenors in Tennessee, don't we folks?"

Roy Acuff opened by singing Great Speckled Bird. All I could hear in my mind was Peace In the Valley. Peace in the valley for me.

* *

The morning of the second day the clock down the hall chimed five times. The room was quiet and I listened to Sherman's steady breathing. I hadn't thought of Sherman's singing voice in many years and yet I could still hear the sweetness of his tenor. It scared me to look at how he'd changed. How sweetness could turn bitter in time. I began shaking, not in fear, but over the passage of time. In an instant, the Lord calmed me. I rose from the floor and looked at him stretched and bound on the bed. Shameful. My lack of faith. Not trusting in the Shepherd to deliver his lamb. *Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*

I loosened the ropes and removed the towels and bindings from the bedposts. Sherman remained motionless. He had wet the sheets with sweat and urine. He groaned.

"I'm thirsty."

The water dribbled down his dry lips onto his chin as I lifted the glass to his twitching mouth. I cradled the back of his neck and lifted his shaking head. He sipped the water and fell back to sleep.

"You sleep now. Lord's watching over you, taking the devil out while you sleep."

I put the ropes and towels back in the box and carried them out to the back porch. I noticed the stainless steel milking bucket by the backdoor. Lord of mercy. I'd forgotten to chore the goats. First time in twenty-three years of milking goats. I pulled on my boots, a jacket, and grabbed the milk bucket.

Doris bellowed at me as I rolled open the barn door and turned on the lights. She was the oldest doe, the heaviest producer, and her udder bulged at the sides in full milk. I opened her gate and she charged for the milking stand. Milk squirted from each teat to the rhythm of

her gait. She stood at attention in the stanchion, waiting for relief. I dumped her portion of grain in the feedbox and set about milking her.

"I'm sorry girl. I was caught up in the house with Sherman last night."

She settled down as I drained her of the warm milk. I felt around her emptied bag to make sure she hadn't gotten mastitis. The younger does bleated quietly. The young buck that Brother Stanley had brought over a few weeks earlier stood on his hind legs in his pen, sniffing the air for a doe in estrus, flicking his tongue, his grey eyes bulging. He ejaculated. I felt the warm stickiness as it landed on my hand and into the milk bucket. One young doe stood still in the pen across the alleyway from the buck. Rock stillness, her tail raised in the air. I set the bucket down and grabbed the buck goat by his collar and led him to the doe. No use in missing an opportunity to have one of the does bred for winter. He mounted and thrust, leaving the doe quickly, her haunches slowly uncoiled from the rapid penetration.

"Enough of you for now," I said, tying the buck securely to a post near his hay bunk. I carried the milk to the pump house to let it cool in a larger bucket of cold water, while I unloaded a rack of fourth-cutting alfalfa hay that the Kalsem brothers had delivered on Friday afternoon.

After stacking the heavy square hay bales, I stepped out from the haymow. Two hours had passed. The sun was rising in the east and the clouds on the horizon looked purplish-red. I entered the back porch of the house and noticed the bathroom light. The house had been dark when I left. Sherman stood over the toilet shaking, trying to empty his bladder.

"Them drugs Doc give me make me weak in my legs."

He breathed hard with each word. His hands and legs shook as he moved toward the hallway back to the bedroom.

"I'll make you something to eat. You'll get your strength back."

"That ain't what I need," he said. "Food. Bring me a..."

"I won't be bringing you any liquor. If that's what you're gonna say. You heard Doc. No more drinking."

He grunted and shut the door. I could hear the bedsprings creak as he lay down.

"I'm gonna drive to town to pick up bag balm and antibiotics for the goats. I'll fix you breakfast when I get back. You rest until I get back."

No answer.

* * *

Clifford Stubbs smiled as I walked into the feed store.

"You're the early bird this morning, Millie. What can I get for you?"

"A can of bag balm and a bottle of sulfa drug. I missed milking chores last night. I'm afraid one of the does might get an infection. Thought I'd beat it to the punch. Sherman's been under the weather. I'd been tending to him and just forgot to milk them."

Mr. Stubbs and his family attended Brother Stanley's church. I could see the concern in his face as I talked.

"Why don't I send my boy Taylor over to help you chore until Sherman gets to feeling better. He's good help and catches on quick. What time should I send him?"

"You don't need to do that. If I need him in the next few days, I'll give you a call. How about that? Just keep us in your prayers, Clifford. I'd appreciate that."

"We'll do that. And you call me anytime if you need help."

I nodded and smiled, then turned toward the door. I looked across the street and saw Brother Stanley walking toward the bank. He stopped and waved. I smiled at him and waved back, before heading to the truck. During the ride home, I thought about the first time that I saw Sherman sing at the State Fair. We were so young. His voice sounded so pure.

* *

The Ferris wheel creaked and the bucket we sat in swung gently at the top. Sherman and I sat high overlooking the State Fair. He held my hand firmly and asked me if I was afraid of heights. I told him I wasn't afraid of anything, not with him there next to me. I was a happy young woman and proud to be sitting next to a future country singer. The night before I had sat and watched him sing his lonesome songs and it seemed that he poured his heart and soul out to the crowd. After the concert that night, Gunder made a point to wait outside and introduce me to Sherman Martin. His eyes stared into mine and we stood together in the milling crowd. He turned to Gunder and smiled.

"Mr. Saebo," said Sherman. "I was wondering if it would be all right with you if I bring Miss Millie down to the fair again tomorrow night. I've got two free tickets to get in and I'd like to take her on some rides in the midway."

"That seems fine with me," said Gunder. "You can ask Millie and see if she'd like to come with you. You just need to have her back home at a decent hour."

It felt like electricity going through my body. He turned toward me with his broad smile and looked into my eyes.

"Miss Millie, you want to come to the fair with me tomorr..."

"Yes! Absolutely!" I said before he'd finished his sentence.

“I reckon I’ll pick you up around 6:30 tomorrow evening, once I finish Mr. Tesdall’s chores.”

And so he did. The next night, we drove in Mr. Tesdall’s farm truck and Sherman sang for me all the way. He’d start out a song and then I’d join in on the chorus. The whole night went on like that. We’d laugh and walk through the fair eating ice cream and cotton candy. The lights and rides and carnival games. Sitting atop that Ferris wheel, we looked out across the city and it seemed like we were seeing our lives together in the future, but neither one of us spoke that thought. We held onto it in our hearts, the way we held each other’s hands that night.

After that night at the fair, Sherman began stopping by Gunder’s farm after supper. We’d ride horses, take walks through the White Oak timber, and play cards with Gunder until bedtime. Sherman’s visits continued over the next two years. He’d help Gunder around the farm in his free time and he’d always come over for Sunday dinner after church.

One summer evening on the 23rd of July in 1943, Sherman asked me to marry him. We’d been sitting under the shade of a large oak tree. He looked into my eyes and told me how much he loved me, how much he wanted to be married and have a family with me. He told me that before I answered him I needed to know that he’d enlisted in the army. He said that military service was a tradition in his family and that he’d likely be drafted anyway. I didn’t hesitate in my answer.

“I’ll be your bride, come army or war. I’ll be your bride.”

* *

I pulled into the farmyard. The kitchen light over the sink shined through the window. Sherman was up again. I opened the door and saw him slumped in a chair at the

table. He held a coffee cup in his left hand. His right hand rested on a whiskey bottle. He was in a stupor. Between the drugs and the whiskey, he couldn't even lift his head.

"You trying to kill yourself?"

I jerked the bottle from his grip and threw it across the kitchen, shattering it against the porcelain sink.

"Whaddya do that..."

He couldn't get the words out. I slapped the coffee cup from his hand and it fell to the floor. He tried to stand, but fell back in his chair. I cried and he sat there looking at the floor.

"Jesus, I asked you! Why aren't you helping me?"

Something clicked inside. A peace. A calm rage. A new sense of control. I pulled Sherman up from the chair by his nightshirt and wrapped his arm around my neck and shoulders. I walked him back to the bedroom. The stench of his body—sweat and liquor oozing from the pores, choked me. I pushed him down onto the bed. He groaned.

"You're not leaving this bed until you, me, and the Lord beat Satan," I said. "You understand me?"

I went to the porch and carried the box of ropes into the bedroom and set them at the foot of the bed. I was right all along the first time. God's spirit had spoken to me to bind up the devil. My human flesh had obeyed and then doubted. Not this time. I cast the towels to the floor and slipped the fresh rope around his ankles and wrists. I cinched each rope and pulled them tautly around the bedposts.

"Goddamn, what are you doing?"

His eyes tried to focus. He seemed to sense the tug of the ropes and he fought trying to free himself, but each resisting pull caused the rope to dig deeper into his flesh. I heard myself cry out.

“I’m doing God’s holy will. I’m trying to save your life. You understand me? Do you?”

I flushed the morphine tablets down the toilet and threw the vial of sedatives and syringes in the trash. If Sherman was to be delivered, it would not be by putting more poison in his body. I spent the rest of the day walking around the farm, following the fence lines, covering miles, trying to forget the image of him lying in bed, bound hand and foot. I carried my Bible and stopped to read whenever the Spirit moved me to do so. The sun sank as the afternoon wore on and I decided that I’d sleep in the barn with the goats. I spent the night in prayer and supplication. I begged for his deliverance, to hear the sound of his voice, to see the clearness in his eyes, and for him to find peace in his heart.

* *

The next morning, the third day, I woke feeling refreshed. I’d slept in a pile of fresh alfalfa bales covered with a heavy blanket. I fed and milked the goats before dawn, turning them out to the pasture before heading for the house. Stanley always said that the Holy Spirit speaks to a person in such a way that the person knows it as if they’d heard a clear voice. He called it knowing God’s will in your knower. He’d tap on his chest over the heart and say here’s your knower. Well, when I woke up I knew that Sherman was alive and yet undelivered. I knew that God was going to work on him for a few more days and that I was his tool to complete his labor of love.

I carried the pail of warm milk to the pump house and retrieved the cooled milk from the night before. Across the farmyard, the house loomed large and dark. There were no lights on. I had left during daylight and hadn't thought to leave a light on in the kitchen or porch. I inhaled a deep breath and exhaled slowly, prayerfully. Fear took control of my thinking. It interrupted my breathing and I wondered what if Sherman had died in the night while I slept peacefully in the goat barn. How would I explain that? How would I justify my tying him up as a means to fight the devil on the Lord's terms?

My casual walk toward the house turned into a dead run. Fear and panic set in, controlling my whole being. Milk sloshed from the pail, soaking my pant leg and boot. Reaching the porch door, I hesitated, listening for any sound of life, any noise that might show me that Sherman still lived. There was silence. A slight rustling of leaves overhead from the early morning breeze, the squeaking of the windmill blade slowly turning rusted metal, but total human silence aside from my breathing.

I clomped onto the porch and kicked off my chore boots. I turned the doorknob and walked into the kitchen. I stopped and listened. Nothing. Not a sound. My heart pounded as I entered the hallway and faced the closed door of the bedroom. I put my hand on the doorknob and held my ear to the door, straining to hear any sound of life, his breathing, the squeak of the box springs.

"Goddamn you crazy bitch, get in here and untie me, now. I've shit and pissed all over myself."

The battle raged. Physical and spiritual. Sherman against me. Satan versus the Lord God Almighty. There would be victory in Jesus before this was finished. I opened the door to a cruel, scared, hateful stare. His flushed face and red eyes glared at me as I stood in the

doorway. I'd seen the look before. It reminded me of the days when Buck was trapping coons. I'd drive him in the pickup at night to check his fence line sets in the ditches along the gravel roads. Occasionally, we'd come upon a live coon trapped, unable to escape our approach. I never forgot the look of rage combined with fear, the hair standing up on the back, the deep guttural growl.

"Untie me! Now! Or I'll kill you!"

I laughed at the stupidity of what he'd said. An uncontrollable giggle that helped me overcome my fear in the situation.

"You're not killing anybody but yourself or the devil and his control over your body. That's the choice. You decide. You're not getting set free until the Lord Jehovah Jireh loosens your chains. You understand me?"

"You and your goddamn religion talk. What's got into you? That ain't no church business I've ever heard of. Now, let me out of these!"

I pulled the headboard of the bed with all my strength, pivoting the bed in the center of the room so that he faced the window in the east, knocking a glass from the nightstand to the floor. It shattered into tiny pieces. I opened the curtains and lifted the shade. The sun shined an early morning orange glow across the pasture outside the window.

"Look at that sunshine! You're going to have one outlook on life until this is over. You're going to watch the sun come up in the morning and the darkness of evening come slowly over this farm. And, when it's all said and done, I hope you'll praise God for what we've come through. All of it."

Sherman wept. His fingers turned purple. He smelled of dirtied sheets. Large beads of sweat dripped from his forehead. I loosened the tautness of the ropes holding his arms. He relaxed and slumped down in the bed from exhaustion.

“Just kill me. Get this over with.”

“I’m going to clean you up,” I whispered. “I’ll fix you some food and feed you.”

The color in his hands returned to normal. I wiped his face and cleaned his body. He lay in silence. I wondered if the battle was over, if the Lord had won the victory in Sherman’s body. Maybe this wasn’t going to be as bad as I’d thought.

Sherman refused to eat the food I brought into the room. Instead, he stared out the window facing the east and remained quiet, sullen. I prayed over him, touching the different parts of his body, pressing God’s healing hands against his failing creation.

I spent the rest of the morning into middle afternoon cleaning out the devil’s handiwork by gathering the empty, full, and partial bottles of whiskey that Sherman had stashed around the farm buildings. I found bottles hidden in drawers, under boxes of tools, beneath floor boards in the barn, and tucked in a hollowed out tree next to the tool shop. By late afternoon, I had a box piled up with 33 whiskey bottles.

I wheeled the box around to the eastside of the house outside of Sherman’s bedroom window. I lifted the deer rifle, pulled back the bolt, and began loading the long 30:06 cartridges into the clip. I gently tapped the barrel against the bedroom window to make sure I had his full attention before walking an armful of bottles to a nearby tree stump. I lined the bottles in single file and retreated to the rifle, lifting its heaviness to my shoulder and focusing my aim on the red crown in the center of the Seagram’s 7 Crown bottle. The

booming shot echoed from the buildings. The lineup of five bottles exploded upon the bullet's impact, scattering chips of broken glass around the stump.

"Praise Jesus! Thy salvation draweth nigh!"

I didn't need to look in the window to see his reaction. I just carried another armful of bottles to the stump and repeated the process until every bottle was destroyed. By the time I was finished, the sun had gone down. The pasture was dark.

I carried the rifle into his room and leaned it in the corner. He glared without saying a word.

"I'm going to fix you food. And you're going to eat it!"

After evening chores, I fixed a bowl of rolled oats soaked in warm goat's milk, and blended with a raw egg. I carried it to the bedroom with a cup of chamomile tea and a broom to sweep up the broken glass from earlier in the morning when I had moved the bed.

"Untie me Millie, I've had enough of this."

His legs and feet twitched uncontrollably. His whole body seemed like a quivering mass. His arms and legs jerked against the ropes. His entire body seized up and then relaxed over and over. He stared off, looking out the window. His eyes fixed on the tree outside.

"Forrest? Private Forrest Buford, is that you?" he said. "I thought I killed you. I thought you were dead. I didn't mean to shoot. I was scared. I didn't mean to shoot you."

Sherman sobbed. He continued talking out of his head as though I weren't in the room. He never took his eyes off the tree in the distance.

"They told me you were dead. Sniper shot. But I knew it 'cuz I killed you. It was an accident. I wanted to tell them. I was scared. I didn't mean to do it."

"Sherman, it's me," I said. "I'm here with you."

He turned toward me. His eyes blurred from crying.

“He’s alive. Forrest ain’t dead. I’ve seen him. He’s alive!”

“You’ve got the jim-jams. You need to hang on and get through this for another day. Now let me feed you.”

I swept the broken glass into a dustpan and stood behind the headboard to loosen the tension on his arms again. I sat on the bed next to him, holding the bowl and spoon.

“Heavenly Father, bless these gifts and may they strengthen Sherman’s body and mind, in Jesus’ name. Amen. Here you go.”

I spooned the gruel into his mouth and he chewed slowly, then stopped and stared. In one quick motion, he spat the mouthful in my face and brought his right arm over and knocked the bowl across my lap, covering me in oatmeal.

“Stick that shit up your ass and untie me, woman. What do you want with me? Quit torturing me.”

I sprang from the bed, wiping my face and grabbing the broom.

“In the precious name of Jesus, come out of him Satan. You and your legion of demons.”

I swung the broom with full force, striking the bottoms of his restrained feet.

“Leave his body Beelzebub, in the name of the one holy and all-powerful God. Greater is He who is in me than he who is in the world.”

Again, I brought the broom down hard across his feet and legs. His body shook in pain and anger. He snarled like a wild animal and I stood over the bed with hands and face raised to the ceiling, breathing in and out a holy prayer language to the Most High.

I shut and locked the door and sat on the floor of the bedroom, my back against the wall, facing him, watching as he cried and convulsed. The hair on my arms and neck lifted and I sensed the room filling with the cold evil demons collected from Sherman's body. I closed my eyes and envisioned his face, his body bound to the bed. A holy flame descended and hovered above him, lighting the room and driving the wickedness from our presence. It was finished.

* *

The fourth day. Sherman slept and I stayed outside of the room. I prayed continuously for God's divine healing hands to crush and destroy the evil that had permeated his body. I doubted. Brother Stanley had once preached that no one can believe, no one can maintain the notion of faith without realizing the fact of doubt. He claimed that doubt and fear were Satan's primary tools of deception.

That evening I entered the room. His body remained still and I listened to his breathing, slow and steady. I untied the ropes from his wrists and ankles. I set a tray of food—a poached egg on toast, a glass of milk, and a cup of tea—on the nightstand, turning the lamp on as I left the room. I stepped out in faith.

* *

The morning of the fifth day, I rose and dressed to do chores. I had heard Sherman get up in the night, walk to the bathroom, and return to bed. I opened the door to the bedroom. He had eaten the food and drank the milk and tea. I prayed over him as he slept and then cleared the tray of dishes from the stand.

The goats waited quietly as I milked and fed each one in turn. A young buckling weaned from his mother stared at me as I walked past his pen. I kept him separated from the

weaned does once he reached 80 pounds. He was the only male out of a set of quadruplets. Brother Stanley once told me to be thankful for the little bucks. He'd said keep the best for breeding sires and butcher the younger ones, the ones that weren't perfect in their confirmation. Slaughter them while they're still young and tender, he'd said. When I finished milking, I put a collar and lead rope on the buckling and led him from the barn to a tree near the house. I walked away and he bleated quietly, watching me walk to the tool shop and return with the butchering equipment.

The five-gallon bucket contained a singletree, a long length of rope with a block and tackle, a small hand saw, two sharp knives—one for cutting the meat, the other for skinning—a large sheet of plastic to lay on the ground and keep the fresh meat protected from dirt and leaves. I quickly secured his hind legs to the wooden singletree, looping short pieces of rope around each leg above his fetlocks and tying them to the metal loops on each end of the singletree. I hooked the block and tackle to the tree branch overhead, lowered the pulley to the large metal ring on the wooden block that spraddled the buckling's legs, before hoisting his body in the air. He twisted in the air and bellowed loudly for a moment until the blood rushed to his head, causing his bluish-grey eyes to bulge. I picked up the smaller skinning knife, feeling the edge to test its sharpness. The young buck kicked its front legs, hovering just above the ground. I gently lifted his head.

"The Lord giveth. The Lord taketh. Blessed be the name of the Lord Most High."

I drew the knife across his throat in one smooth motion, slitting the skin, the windpipe, and main artery. Blood gushed into the bucket. The buckling thrashed for a few seconds, then became still. I glanced at the house. Sherman stood at the window watching, then turned and disappeared into the darkness.

“You’ll make a fine supper for him and me. A celebration stew. The lost has been found. The lame can walk. The sick has been made whole. Praise God!”

I spent the rest of the day cutting and wrapping meat for the freezer. I set aside a length of the loin meat to cut up for the stew. It would be a meal of victory.

After disposing of the goat’s remains, I carried the meat into the kitchen. I heard the radio playing country music in the bedroom. It went silent. Sherman closed the door and clicked the lock. I placed the bowl of stew meat in the refrigerator and the packages of wrapped meat in the freezer.

“We’ll celebrate in time,” I said, loud enough for him to hear through the door. “I waited this many years. I can wait another day.”

* *

After chores on the sixth morning, I started browning the meat in a large pot and chopping carrots, potatoes, and onions for the stew. The meat sizzled in the oil filling the kitchen with a sweet smell. I dropped the vegetables into the pot and covered them with salted water to make a broth.

I heard the lock unclick on the door to the bedroom. I turned and stepped into the hallway. Sherman stood outside of the room, the rifle cradled in his arm. I watched his face, looked into his eyes. They looked clear and yet tired.

“What are you doing?”

I stepped backward and he walked toward me. He stopped and stood frozen in the hallway with the gun in his arms. His face showed no expression. He stepped forward. I stepped back.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Why do you have the gun?”

"It's loaded," he said. "This here gun's loaded."

"Just put the gun down," I said. "Please, Sherman!"

"You ought not leave a gun loaded in the house. Not a smart idea. A person could get hurt."

He stepped closer. I stood in front of him, unmoving.

"What do you want..."

He opened the rifle's magazine and the shells dropped into his hand.

"Can you put it away? Put these back in the box?"

He handed me the rifle in his right hand, the four cartridges from his left one. I took them from him, his hands slightly shaking. He turned around and walked back into the bedroom, shutting the door. I opened the door to the back porch to put the rifle away.

Down the hallway through the closed door, I heard a weak voice singing softly: *Way back in the hills when a boy I once wandered, buried deep in a grave lies the one that I loved. She was called from this earth, a jewel for heaven, more precious than diamonds, more precious than gold...*

I knocked on the door. The singing stopped. No answer.

"I heard you singing. It sounded good. You feeling better? Doc's coming tomorrow to check on you. You need to rest all day."

No answer. I walked back to the kitchen and stirred the stew, trying to remember the name of the song. It was an old-time song. A mountain tune—high and lonesome.

He started singing again through the bedroom door.

"Well the bear will be gentle

And the wolves will be tame

And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh yes,"

I slowly walked toward the bedroom and stood outside the closed door. I hummed the tune and he continued singing, his voice growing stronger.

"And the beasts from the wild

Shall be lit by a child

And I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh yes,"

The words came to me at the chorus line and I sang along with him through the closed door that separated us. We sang.

"There will be peace in the valley for me, some day

There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray

There'll be no sadness, no sorrow

No trouble, trouble I see

There will be peace in the valley for me, for me."

Sherman opened the door. We stood face to face, looking into each other's eyes.

"Millie, can you bring me a cup of coffee on the front porch? I'm gonna sit in the rocking chair today and warm up in the sunshine."

"I'll bring some right out. You go on out and I'll pour some for you. I fixed stew for us. After awhile, I'll bring you out a bowl of that too. Make you feel alive again."

"I like a lot of black pepper in my stew," he said. "Will you put black pepper in it for me?"

"I'll put as much pepper in it as you want. I know you like pepper. I know you do."

IN HEAT LIFE PASSES

Taylor Stubbs

It was the morning Stanley Sydnes brought his buck goat Ace over to the Martin farm to breed Mrs. Martin's yearling doe. It was a warm, sunny September morning, Labor Day, 1977. As I road my bike along the gravel road, I could smell the dying heat of the late summer cornfields, the fired cornstalks of the endrows along the fence, blazed by the bright sunlight, revealing the impending change.

That morning, Mrs. Martin called our house at 6:30. She said she needed help with the morning chores. She told my mother that little Dorie Anne was standing in heat, that Mr. Sydnes was on his way with the breeding buck, and that Mr. Kalsem was bringing a rack of fourth-cutting alfalfa hay in the forenoon. She wanted to know if I was awake yet, if I could ride over to help her milk, then stay to help handle the goats and unload the hayrack. I normally only helped Mrs. Martin with the evening chores, cleaning pens, mixing feed for her milking does, her girls she called them.

My father said it was because she had never had daughters of her own that she loved those goats so much. Purebred Saanens, white as snow, quiet and gentle. Her girls would come when called by name, stand and nuzzle my side, wait for me to pet their backs or scratch under their chins. She never allowed a buck goat to remain on the farm once it had been weaned. She never kept her own breeding buck, rather she would hire Stanley to bring one of his top-grade breeders to the farm when one of the does was standing in heat.

I had started working for the Martins toward the end of July, shortly after my twelfth birthday. Their youngest son Buck had left the farm and hadn't told anyone where he was going or how long he'd be gone. The middle son Donald had gone to college and never had

much contact with the family. He rarely stopped by to visit. My mother would say, those boys are no account like their father. Then, she'd say, if you ever see that Sherman Martin drinking hard liquor while you're there, you get right on that bike and pedal home, buster. You understand me, she'd say. I understood, but everyone said Mr. Martin had quit drinking liquor three months earlier after Doc Nordstrom told him that he hadn't much time left. Everyone said he quit cold turkey. According to my father, Larry Conkel the REC meter man had driven over to the Martin farm one day to read the electric meter on the back side of the house. It had been during the week that Mr. Martin had quit drinking. Mr. Conkel said he'd heard Mr. Martin screaming in pain from inside the house. Mrs. Martin stood in her garden the whole time hoeing weeds as though nothing was wrong.

My father was more sympathetic to Mr. Martin. He said Sherman had suffered a lot during World War II, fought at Omaha beach and watched men around him get slaughtered. Father said Mr. Martin had escaped with shrapnel wounds in his legs, but never got any Purple Heart or nothing.

Stanley Sydnes would drive to the farm in his Chevy pickup on those mornings. He'd pull his small livestock trailer with the picture of a dairy goat's head painted on the side and circle up into the open area of the farmyard.

The farmyard was shaped like a horseshoe. The large farmhouse sat at one end and a string of outbuildings formed the horseshoe. The house, the tool shop, the machine shed, a small barn where Mr. Martin spent his days, the feedhouse, a silo, a corncrib, and the large barn, the barn Mrs. Martin had converted into her goat barn. The buildings framed the large open grassy area.

Mrs. Martin's barn was full of the sounds of life, impatient goats bleating, waiting to be milked or handed a fresh section of hay, a random rooster crowing, then scattering when approached by a stamping hoof. It was alive with smells. The fragrance of fourth cutting hay, dried green leafiness with little or no stem, Mrs. Martin called it cotton candy for her girls. She only bought the best for her goats, the richest hay of the season, the finest and hardest, triple-cleaned oats shipped from North Dakota. She had sectioned the barn off into smaller areas. Each area had a specific purpose. She had made a milking room. It was neat as a pin, fastidiously swept clean everyday. It had a raised milking platform and stanchion. She had built a locked feed room to keep the goats safe from overeating grain. Her tack room, where she trimmed hooves and clipped long coats in the summer heat, was arranged with collars and clipping shears hanging on the wall. In the far corner of the barn, an area closed off so that the milking does could not hear the young bleats, Mrs. Martin had enclosed a small nursery for the goat kids. She would separate the young and fragile kids from their mothers within the first twenty-four hours. She would bottle-feed them, raise them as her own, and form a bond that would last their lifetime. Mrs. Martin could call her adult does by their names and they would come obediently to her voice.

In previous visits, upon seeing Stanley, Mr. Martin would walk into the small barn north of the goat shed. It seemed, according to my father, Mr. Martin didn't like Mr. Sydnese because Stanley had fought at the Battle of the Bulge. Stanley had been wounded twice and had saved some of the men in his unit. Stanley had received two purple hearts and a Bronze Star for his action in the war. Every Fourth of July, Stanley was allowed to walk in the Sheldahl or Slater parade, depending on whether it was an even or odd year. Stanley walked alone in a special spot amongst the color guard, an honored warrior. Another reason Mr.

Martin seemed to not like Stanley was that whenever he'd come over to provide his stud service, Mrs. Martin would always dress nicely. She'd have her hair fixed for church. She'd bring Stanley fresh coffee and baked goods. She'd smile and laugh at his stories. He'd always tip his hat to her as he stepped out of his truck with his cane in hand. He'd toss me a lead rope and tell me to be careful because Sydnes White Star had a head full of steam, especially around young does. Stanley called the buck by its registered name, Sydnes White Star, but I called it Ace.

Ace was his main breeder that summer, a large-bodied buck, thickly boned with an off-white curly-haired coat. Around his muzzle, chest, and beard, Ace was covered with a brown sticky substance that smelled musky sweet when he'd walk out of the trailer. I had once asked Mr. Martin, after watching my first breeding experience at the farm, why Mr. Sydnes's goats always smelled so strongly. He said, "You'd stink too boy, if you were covered in your own piss and spunk all day long." He shook his head and turned and walked slowly back to the tool shop.

* *

On the morning Mrs. Martin called, that warm Labor Day morning, I watched Mr. Martin inch toward the old, small barn as I rode up the long lane toward the horseshoe. The small barn, which is what everyone called it, even though I thought it looked pretty darn big, seemed as though it would fall down in a strong wind. Mr. Martin had once used the lower part, the area below the haymow, as a place to farrow his sows. Now, the barn was empty. Full of dust and cobwebs. In the haymow everything was dark. Small shafts of lights burrowed through the cracks in the walls, the holes in the roof. The large thick crossbeams loomed high overhead. Mrs. Martin had once said. "Taylor, you make sure you never put

clean hay for those goats in that rundown old barn. In fact you stay out of that barn all together. It's not safe in there." That morning, I watched Mr. Martin disappear behind the barn door.

Stanley tipped his white hat to me, tossed me the lead rope as he had in the past, and warned me to be careful that his buck was ready to roar. He laughed and walked over to greet Mrs. Martin, to sample her cookies and sip her fresh coffee. I opened the end gate, walked to the front and snapped the lead rope to his collar before untying Ace from his post. I led him into the bright sunlight and fresh air. His smell wafted out of the trailer. His bulging eyes squinted to readjust to the bright sunlight. The buck jerked his head to the right and left, lifted his nose high, then began flicking his tongue in the air. He heard the doe's soft bleat. She stood behind a fenced pen, her tail twitching slowly, then in rapid bursts. The buck bolted toward the pen.

"Hang on to him boy," Stanley yelled. "I don't want him getting tore up trying to jump that fence."

"Yes sir, I will," I yelled back. The buck suddenly tugged hard, causing me to stumble. He dragged me through the dirt toward the pen.

Stanley came over and took control of his goat, while Mrs. Martin opened the gate of the pen. The young doe looked small next to the large buck. Each pranced and circled. The buck snorted and blew air through its mouth, its eyes bulging, frenzied. The doe froze in her tracks, standing statue still. Ace flicked his tongue rapidly over the doe's vulva, snorted, and then mounted the doe, thrusting deeply. The doe staggered under the weight of the buck, her loin curving down during penetration, her back hunching upward. The buck dismounted. Stanley held tight to the lead rope, fighting to maintain control of the buck, which was now

ready for a second attempt. The doe straightened out, shook herself, and was led away by Mrs. Martin to the goat shed.

She reemerged from the shed and pulled out a wad of money to pay Stanley for his service.

"Well, that should take care of her, Millie," he said. "Just let me know if she doesn't settle. I'll come back and try again."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," she said. They stood near his truck talking quietly for some time, and then I heard his truck's engine start and the squeaking sound of the trailer's wheels as he left the farmyard. Mrs. Martin walked toward the house. She turned and said softly, "You can go home now Taylor. Mr. Kalsem called as you were riding up and said we'd unload the hay before supper after milking. He said he'd bring one of his older boys to help. I appreciate you coming over and helping me this morning. I'll see you this evening at chore time."

I walked over to my bike. It was leaning against the foundation of the small barn. I heard Mr. Martin's voice from inside the haymow. He yelled loudly, but I couldn't tell what he was saying. His voice stopped. There was silence for a few moments and then I heard him start crying. He made a soft sobbing sound that went on for awhile and finally ended. He started speaking again in his normal voice and I wondered if someone else was in the barn with him.

I opened the door quietly and shut it behind me, trying to find my way through the darkness and the cobwebs. Everything inside the barn was covered with a layer of dust. The building hadn't been used for livestock in several years and the old straw on the floor smelled musty when I walked through to get to the opening of the haymow. I slowly climbed the

ladder and poked my head through the opening of the floor above me. Through the darkness, I could see the shadow of Mr. Martin. He sat quietly on the crossbeam twenty five feet above the floor of the haymow. I wondered how he'd climbed so high to get on the beam and then I noticed the permanent wooden ladder nailed to the wall of the barn a few feet to his right. He talked in his normal voice but the words sounded garbled in the large open space. He uncapped a bottle and tipped it back and leaned forward with his chin resting on his chest. I remembered my mother's warning, if you see him take a drink of hard liquor you get on that bike and pedal home right now. Do you understand?

Suddenly, he yelled and cursed. His outburst startled me and at first I thought that he'd seen me below watching him. His voice was stronger than I had ever heard it. Clear. Full of anger. I moved closer to where he was sitting on the beam until I was almost directly beneath him

"What have you done to me? Where were you when I called out, when I called on your name the way I was taught? You never answered me."

He started whimpering and crying. And I realized that he was drunk and out of his head. I remembered back a few months earlier when Mrs. Martin had come to Brother Stanley's church service to announce that her husband Sherman had been delivered from his addiction to alcohol. She seemed so excited and happy. People took turns giving her hugs. And Brother Stanley told all of us to give God a handclap offering of praise and thanks for his power and glory. Now, standing below Mr. Martin and him being drunk as a skunk, I wondered where it all went wrong with him and God.

“What a lie,” he said. “And I accepted it and believed it. I passed it down to my sons, the way it was passed to my generation, them generations that came before me. You listening to me? You hear my voice?”

I didn’t understand what he was talking about. I knew it was wrong, watching him like that, listening to him, and not letting him know I was there in the darkness. I could feel the hairs on my arms pop up. He uncapped the bottle and took another swig, draining what liquor was left. He pitched it up in the air and I watched the bottle hang before dropping to the straw-covered floor. The bottle didn’t break but it caused a cloud of choking dust to rise up around me. I coughed and sneezed loudly. I wanted to run but I stood still.

“Who is that down there?” Mr. Martin shouted and tried to look toward the floor without losing his balance on the crossbeam.

“It’s me,” I said, meekly. “Taylor Stubbs.”

“What the hell do you want?” he asked. His shoulders weaved back and forth.

“I heard some commotion in here when I was leaving,” I said. “I thought that maybe you needed some help or something. You want for me to go and get Mrs. Martin?”

“No!” he said. “I don’t need nothing from her or you or nobody. Now get the hell out of here and leave me alone!”

I knew there was something wrong with him besides his being drunk. But, in the darkness of the barn, I couldn’t see the expression of his face or the look in his eyes. He had never seemed like a happy person in the time that I’d known him during the past few months that I’d been helping Mrs. Martin with the chores. He always acted angry and bitter. He’d never been mean to me in all that time, but I’d always made it a point to steer clear of him when I’d see him coming.

"Boy," he said. "What do you see when you look around this barn?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn't sure what he was asking with his question so I hesitated to answer.

"Goddamnit boy!" he said. "I asked you a question. What do you see when you look around this barn?"

"Nothing sir," I said. "I don't see anything but you up there and me down here and a lot of old hay and straw on the floor."

"Damn right!" he said. "Good answer. You know what I see, boy?"

"No," I said. "I don't know what you see. But you can tell me if you want."

I didn't know what else to say. I didn't understand what point he was trying to make. But, all of a sudden, even though he'd just finished drinking a bottle of straight whisky, he didn't seem to be as drunk as what I'd thought.

"I'll tell you what I see," he said. "I see this old barn, this building of my own sweat. And it's empty. Ain't no livestock, no fresh cured hay and most important, there ain't no sons of mine here on this farm and up in this barn with me to carry on my work. Everything in my life has been taken and driven away and scattered to where I can't stand the thought of what I'm missing now. This here building is a broken down shell of what it was. Filled with dust and nothing and old hay turned brown with mold and empty stalls and rotten rope. You listening to me, boy?"

I listened to him, the loneliness of his words, the desperation of his voice as he sat alone high in the barn.

"Yes sir," I said softly. "I'm hearing what you're saying. But how are we going to get you down from there? I'm afraid you might fall if I don't go get somebody to help."

“God will get me down from here, boy!” he said. “In his due time, God will bring me down from here when He’s good and ready. You believe in God, boy?”

“Yes, Mr. Martin,” I said. “Of course I believe in God.”

“That’s good, boy!” he said. “Now, I want to tell you something. It was God that hardened my heart just like he hardened Pharaoh’s heart back in Egypt. You remember that story boy?”

“Yes sir,” I said. I wasn’t sure what he was talking about so I played along to make him happy.

“Hardened my heart. That’s what God did,” he said. “He took my son and he drove the rest of my boys away from me. He allowed me to see the ways of destruction that no human was meant to see or live through. You hearing me?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m hearing you.”

“You ever seen a man die, Taylor?” he asked. The words seemed to drift from his mouth, from an area around his head as I peered upward through the dimness of the darkened barn.

“No, Mr. Martin,” I said. “I’ve never seen a man die and I hope I never do!”

He became quiet and he straightened up on the beam and it appeared that he’d raised his face toward the roof overhead.

“Most High,” he said. “You hovering out of reach through all of time, over the blood and destruction of your creation.”

He was talking to God, talking in a way that made me scared the barn would collapse in on him and me if he didn’t stop. He went on, his voice still strong.

“Truth and war. Finding honor in killing. It ain’t nothing but one man wanting something that someone else has, pitting men against men to get it done, killing for what he wants. What a lie. Cowardice in the face of death, my fear at seeing other men die, our lives and blood washed away on the beach. I’m done. Hear me? You hear me? Done!”

He started crying, sobbing. His body shook.

“Mr. Martin! Mr. Martin, don’t cry,” I said. “You just sit still and I’ll run and get someone to help you down from there. You just sit tight!”

“You get on out of here, boy!” he said. “You get on out of this barn and leave me alone!”

I quickly headed for the ladder to climb down and go for help. I turned around and put my foot on the top rung. I watched Mr. Martin high up there on the crossbeam. I could see his body weave back and forth, his crying became quieter. Suddenly, he fell forward off the crossbeam. It seemed like slow motion, him slipping off the beam in the darkness. His body dropped. He stopped abruptly in midair. I could feel the heat of that morning suffocating me. I could hear his quiet groaning, the rope creaking softly from his weight. He and I were alone. I watched his body twist slowly in the shadow until its movement stopped.